

PIERRE  
GRIMBERT

*The  
Secret  
of Ji* 2

THE ORPHANS'  
PROMISE



The  
SECRET OF JI Z:

THE ORPHANS' PROMISE

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The  
SECRET OF JI Z:  
THE ORPHANS' PROMISE

PIERRE  
GRIMBERT

TRANSLATED BY  
MATT ROSS AND ERIC LAMB

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OCEAN OF MIRRORS



SEA OF FIRE



PLEASIAN SEA



BRE'W'AN OCEAN

### *Author's Note*

At the end of the book, the reader will find a “Short Anecdotal Encyclopedia of the Known World,” a glossary that defines certain terms used by the narrator and provides supplementary details that don’t appear in the story, without giving the story away, of course—far from it!

Therefore, the reading of the “Short Anecdotal Encyclopedia” can be done in parallel with the story, at moments the reader finds opportune.

## PROLOGUE

**P**raised be Eurydis. May her teachings serve you well.

Before the gods, my name—the one I was given when the sun rose on my first day in this world—is Lana Lioner of Ith, daughter of Cerille and Lioner.

Quite a big name for such a small thing, as Maz Rôl had the habit of saying when he wanted to tease me. And yet, he was the one who lengthened it further by adding the title, Maz. Fortunately, people simply call me Maz Lana, even if this invented title draws avowals of respect and deep admiration that I don't deserve; only the gods are worthy of that kind of esteem. But this is hardly the subject that preoccupies my thoughts right now. I could always debate this question with a circle of students, if I am ever given the opportunity to teach again.

I am a descendant of Maz Achem d'Algonde of Ith, who carried out the duties of ambassador for the Grand Temple to the Grand Empire of Goran between the years 760 and 771 of the Eurydian calendar. The post was very important and was held in high esteem by the Temple's administration, and was typically seen as a step on the way to being anointed an Emaz. But despite his title, my ancestor's name is rarely spoken without a certain malaise.

When my parents spoke about an ancestor from one of their lineages, it was always with praise, pride, and nostalgia. There were several Maz in our bloodline, as well as a few Emaz, and they all left their mark on the history of the Holy City. There were war chiefs as well, fierce soldiers and ambitious conquerors from a past just as distant as it was grim. They were all alluded to with respect, and the paths they followed, however wrong they may have been, followed the dominant mores of the era.

*My great-grandfather Maz Achem was the only one mentioned as a necessary link in the chain, a piece connecting these prestigious ancestors to the more recent generations, a piece which would have been happily removed if it were possible. We never spoke about his actions, his life, the trace he left in the world, and especially avoided his relationship with the universal quest for Eurydis's Moral.*

*Of course, as a child I hardly thought twice about it. But growing up, this omission began to intrigue me, and I eventually questioned my parents. Although still young, I could easily tell that my question put them ill at ease. Which merely piqued my curiosity, for I had gotten used to getting all the answers I wanted. There was no subject of conversation that was off-limits in our household—a principle I held dear and that I continued to apply with my circle of students.*

*After some hesitation, my father answered me, choosing his words in such a way that they were neither disrespectful nor scornful. That's the impression of Achem that his story left...*

*Although he had dedicated the greater part of his early life to studying and teaching the Goddess's Moral, as was his duty, during his later years, Maz Achem had changed drastically. He had become a dissenter, a reformist guilty of several immoral acts. The first of which was the abandonment of his post as ambassador to the Grand Empire—a decision he made without even announcing it to the Temple, and which he never explained.*

*Upon his return to Ith, he seeded disorder in several gatherings of Emaz, going as far as to persecute the great priests in their own temples. This conduct alone would have been enough to discredit him, but what drove him to these extreme acts was even worse—on the verge of sacrilegious. He absolutely insisted that others listen to him. But all the Emaz had already heard enough. Achem was asking the great priests to make a profound modification in their interpretation of certain precepts of the Moral of Eurydis. However, he himself recognized his inability to present any convincing argument. If he indeed had reasons, Maz Achem never provided them.*

*Of course the Emaz priests refused, encouraging him to return to ideas more in line with those of the Temple.*

*He persisted in his efforts, though, embarking on a campaign of public speeches in which he presented his theories, even though they had already*

*been judged as antithetical to the Moral by the wisest of our wise, despite Maz Achem's esteemed position.*

*Faced with his obstinacy, the Emaz had no other choice but to declare him a heretic—the highest dishonor—and to revoke his title of Maz, something that has only occurred four times in our history. Their punishment at least had its anticipated effect: Achem ended up abandoning his futile and harmful crusade and left to settle in Mestèbe, where he died a few years after, never again attempting to corrupt Eurydis's teachings.*

*My father had nothing else to add. He asked me if I had learned something from the story, as if he had just told me a simple religious fable. I said I had and made a vow to never betray Eurydis's Moral, which is what he expected of me. Still, I was perplexed.*

*Up until then, everything that I had been taught rested on these three values: Knowledge, Tolerance, and Peace. The three virtues of the wise ones. The three steps to climb to reach the Moral.*

*During my ancestor's era, hadn't the Emaz disregarded one of the first two? Weren't Achem's ideas, as a Maz and high figure of the Temple, worthy of interest?*

*I immediately regretted this disrespectful thought and tried hard to forget it. Unsuccessfully.*

*By following my curiosity, I disturbed Peace. But in turning a blind eye to my doubts, I insulted Knowledge and Tolerance.*

*Why had Maz Achem been silenced?*

*I decided to find out.*



Braced against the open sea off the Lorelien coast, only a few leagues from a nearly nameless village, there is a small, uninhabited island. An island like the dozens of others that dot the Median Sea with barren beaches, rocky landscapes, and shorelines made jagged by untiring waves. An island that is only recorded by the occasional eccentric or overly meticulous cartographer as a simple speck on a few rare pieces of parchment, which, after time, could easily be confused for an indiscernible smudge.

However, this island, ignored by most men, fascinated a handful. Among them was the Judge Zamerine, the secret spiritual chief of the

Lorelien messengers—and even more secretly, the uncontested master of all the Züu priests in the Upper Kingdoms.

“How much longer?” Zamerine asked the captain.

The captain, an old fisherman, jumped. It was the first time the Judge had spoken to him. Up to that point, he had only dealt with the youngest Züu, the Judge’s footman, no doubt. While the fisherman got along just fine with the younger one, the Judge seemed difficult. Worse, his cold, scornful stare was impossible to hold.

“Uh... two centidays, maybe; long enough for the dawn to clear,” he answered nervously. “With this headwind, I can’t do better than that.”

“That is much too long.”

The fisherman didn’t know how to respond. It wasn’t his fault, blood of the Gods! Their damned island wasn’t going to float away! It would still be there, even a hundred years from now!

Of course he kept these thoughts to himself. First of all, he had been paid—well paid even—for this trip to Ji. Next, and above all, his two passengers made his skin crawl.

The Judge’s eyes never left the rocky mass that was their destination. His frozen stare didn’t show the slightest emotion. And the footman kept his eyes on the fisherman. As if ready to derail any plot the fisherman might be planning. Or as if he were planning one himself.

The fisherman didn’t let his imagination go any further, and he let himself be absorbed in the contemplation of a distant flock of graceful swans, flying above the waves. One more look at either one of his passengers and he would have thrown himself overboard.



*I don’t know which one brought about the other, but my curiosity for my ancestor Maz Achem grew at the same time as my interest in the history of the Holy City. I studied the chronicles with Maz Rôl, my teacher, but researched Achem alone and in secret. Keeping my personal studies secret may have been the only lie I ever told my parents. I suppose I should regret it, but I can’t. Everything I discovered was fascinating.*

*The records of that era describe Maz Achem as a model of virtue for the entire Eurydian world. At least until 771. After that date, he was only mentioned for his heresy. I looked for the event that could explain his*

*transformation. Logically, he must have experienced something out of the ordinary, some painful experience; nothing else could explain why he changed so much in so little time.*

*My research opened up a new mystery. The first accounts of Maz Achem's strange behavior, although vague, appeared after his return from a diplomatic mission in Lorelia, which kept him out of the Holy City for more than fifty days, five full dékades.*

*Despite my efforts, I could never find anything about this mission: the goal, the result, or even who was part of it. My quest was going to come to an end just as it was getting interesting. However, Eurydis must have heard my prayers because some new hints were exposed a few years later, after I had more or less given up.*

*During a didactic course from Maz Rôl on the Uborre Dynasty of Goran, I learned that the Emperor Mazrel had lost a son on a strange mission to a small Lorelien island. The date matched up with Achem's travels. My hope rekindled, I delved back into my research, this time in the Goranese archives. I summoned my courage to leave Ith and travel to the capital of the Grand Empire; the knowledge was worth it.*

*I finally got a piece of the truth. In the Eurydian year 711, compelled by a certain Nol the Strange, diplomats came from most of the kingdoms of the known world for a meeting in Lorelia. Maz Achem and the Goranese Prince Vanamel were among the attendees.*

*They all disappeared under strange circumstances, before reappearing two moons later, without being able to recall what had become of those who were missing or what had happened. The whole affair was known only to the royal courts and then faded into oblivion along with the deaths of those involved.*

*I was far from being satisfied. The story wasn't detailed enough to help me understand Achem's transformation.*

*I resolved to attack the problem from a different angle.*

*I would study his forbidden teachings.*



Zamerine walked respectfully along the island's shore, as if he treaded on the sacred soil of Lus'an itself. Few of his fellow followers had ever had this chance, a fact that added to his satisfaction.

Over the past several moons, Ji had become a central concern for Zuia and her Judges. Never, in the history of the cult, had so many of the Goddess's messengers been solicited to deliver her sentence.

In his own way, Zamerine rejoiced at the opportunity to bring justice. He savored the pride he felt in contributing to the Great Work. The only thing he was missing was the satisfaction of a job well done. The men Zamerine had dispatched to Ji to finish the job had never returned. Nor had a single one of the pathetic men who went with them, for that matter. But that only bothered him a little. His messengers had perished serving their Goddess. For their work, they would indulge in the delights of Lus'an for eternity. A Ziu messenger couldn't hope for a better destiny.

Losing a few men from the Guild was not a problem, either. No one would miss them. Not even their so-called *brothers*, those who had survived and made no effort to protect the bodies. Zamerine felt nothing but contempt for these thugs.

He turned back toward Dyree, his assistant. With their boat destroyed, the Guild brothers had been stuck on the island since the evening before. They would have bowed down before him if he had asked. Instead, he quickly extinguished their hope of a quick rescue. Zamerine let them know that he didn't intend to bring them back to the continent, since they had proven to be inept. They were all quick to promise him eternal loyalty, which was always useful. As such, he was able to get a detailed account of the previous night's events, without having to pry it from them, which saved him precious time.

His assistant appeared at his side to tell him that the daggers of the deceased were nowhere to be found. It was a great sacrilege to leave a *hati* dagger in the hands of anyone who wasn't a messenger, so Zamerine told the brothers, as a final condition for their rescue, to return the sacred blades.

Since it took a while for the accusations to surface about which of the brothers was to blame, Zamerine had taken a walk. But he couldn't waste any more time. So he simply said, "Kill them all, Dyree."

Dyree slid toward the small group, and two men fell to their knees.

"Wait!" one of them yelled. "It was Micaeir; it was him! He has the daggers!"

The accused man fled without even putting up a fight. He crumbled to the sand before he could take ten strides, his last two with a *hati* in his chest.

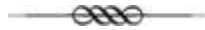


Zamerine himself killed the one who had ratted him out for having hid this information for so long. He gave the others the benefit of the doubt.

Dyree gathered up the daggers, and they left. The old fisherman was the color of the pale moon, and dumbstruck. Zamerine briefly wondered what he would do with their old captain, but quickly forgot this insignificant detail. Two more important tasks were at hand for now.

The first one, unpleasant as it was, was to inform the Accuser that some of the heirs, the guilty, had still not received their sentences.

The second was to fix that. He celebrated his chance to hunt. It had been years since his last time. His only desire was that his prey lived up to his expectations.



*Achem had written a great number of speeches, lectures, and collections of his ideas; I was sure of it. However, I had difficulty obtaining even a few of them, all the more so since I had to act discreetly. The writings in the Holy City's libraries were uncensored, even if judged to be conflicting with the Moral. It was held that the study of erroneous theories could just as well help novices progress toward the three virtues. And that it was best to discuss these ideas under the guidance of an experienced Maz as soon as possible, rather than leaving the youngest students to face them alone.*

*It was different for texts whose author was himself part of the Temple. Those were much too dangerous. And so, the few copies of Achem's writing I found all issued from private archives, which I could never have consulted without Maz Rôl's influence and reputation as a virtuous teacher. I dove into reading them. It was readily apparent to me that my great-grandfather was completely healthy in mind and was aware of his acts. He expressed his ideas with intelligence, reflection, and knowledge; he must have been a great Maz.*

*It was only the theme of his lectures that was troublesome.*

*Ith had been peaceful for more than eight centuries. Although the city's history had always been tied to the cult of Eurydis, a great number of other religions made a place for themselves there, and the Grand Temple accepted them all. There were certainly a few squabbles at one time or another between hotheaded novices, but nothing too serious.*

*Achem suggested a less-tolerant, more aggressive cult. According to him, the universal quest for the Moral was far from reaching its end. All the Maz had to precipitate things. To convert with all their might.*

*The first objective was the dissolution of the demonist cults, by force if necessary. According to Achem, peaceful Ith had to declare war against the followers of the K'lur, Prias, and Yoos cults; against the messengers of Zuia; the girls of Soltan; the Valipondes; and dozens of others.*

*At the time, none of these cults were represented in the Holy City. Achem proclaimed it was Ith's moral duty to charter boats, recruit soldiers, to form an army. "It's in our people's blood," he reminded them. Maz Achem wanted a crusade against Evil. He called for war, at the same time lamenting its tragic consequences. This was the cost of the Moral, and it needed to be pursued with urgency.*

*What happened on the island of Ji? What did he live through that so transformed him?*

*A tragic event delayed my search for a while. Within a few days' span, both of my parents fell fatally ill. As for their agony, it endured for a moon, nearly three dékades.*

*Of course I spent all my time watching over them. I wouldn't go into detail about these terrible days during which my thoughts were a thousand leagues from the actions of my ancestor, if a certain event hadn't connected this tragedy to the centuries past.*

*In his last moments, my father insisted that I record his last will and testament. I was to finish a few tasks he had begun, all seemingly insignificant to me but important in his eyes. He didn't want to leave anything unfinished as he left this world.*

*Among other requests, he made me make a strange promise: to burn Maz Achem's journal if it ever fell into my hands.*

*The wind was knocked out of me. Maz Achem's journal! He had written a journal!*

*I agreed to my father's request, already having resolved to read the text before destroying it, since this wouldn't break the vow I made. And then I avidly questioned him about it.*

*He wasn't even sure that the journal existed. According to family memory, Achem, unable to convince the Emaz, unveiled part of its contents to one of the grand priests as a last resort. This event purportedly spurred his ultimate dismissal from the Temple.*

*This new trail was promising. But during the dékades that followed my parents' death, I no longer had much interest in anything.*

*Not long after, I received a letter from a certain Xan, from Partacle. He had heard the news and offered his condolences. He also invited me to join some kind of celebration reuniting the descendants of the wise ones who had, a century before, taken part in the strange voyage to the isle of Ji.*

*Still too burdened by grief, I responded with a short letter of thanks, declining the invitation. My passion for this old story had been put to rest. Furthermore, I was terribly afraid to leave Ith and to meet with strangers.*

*Of course things are different now.*

*Someone hired the Züu killers and designated me a target. I had to flee Ith, to seek refuge in a modest temple near Mestèbe, a dékade's voyage away.*

*I visited the house that sheltered my ancestor during his final years. It still belonged to a branch of the family, some distant cousins I never knew. I discovered that they had already been assassinated by the Züu.*

*The journal wasn't there. Or was no longer there. Or worse, never existed.*

*There is only one way to know for sure.*

## BOOK III: THE JUDGMENT OF ZUÏA

The rain violently battered the poorly assembled slate tiles, and the cacophony was deafening. In the full darkness that was the ninth and penultimate deciday, it was easy to imagine that an army of sprites was dancing a jig on the roof. And that, at any moment, it could collapse under the weight of a single portly dancer.

Two men argued underneath the porch of a small farm, a few miles from wealthy Lorelia. One was stooped, small, and for some reason must have preferred to keep his breath smelling foul because anyone else would have rinsed out their mouth several times with an extract from the roses of Manive, if they reeked as he did.

The other man was young and good-looking, of medium height, and could count his friends on one hand. Of which the first man was not one. The tone of their strange conversation intensified with each exchange.

"I'm not asking for much, anyhow. Two nights. Just two nights in your warehouse. You won't even have to worry about us! Come on, what difference does it make if you rent it out to store merchandise or to people?" asked the young man.

"It's very different," the little one responded, hopelessly searching for convincing arguments. "It's much more dangerous. And... it's out of the ordinary, that's all."

"I don't see how it's any more dangerous than smuggling past the gates of Lorelia!" the younger one lied.

The short one frantically signaled for him to lower his voice, as if they were right in the middle of a meeting of royal tax collectors. The younger man seemed to be enjoying himself.

He chanted, “Junian wine! Beer from Cyr! Spiced oranges! Statues from Jérusnie! Cloth from Phar!”

“Stop it!”

“Ezomine stones! Oil from Crek! Goranese blades! Jewels! Raji the Ferryman’s warehouse welcomes any merchandise you can offer, without paying the smallest tax to the Crown! Not a single tice for Bondrian! Yes, Raji can smuggle and store anything, except for friends.” His tone dropped at the last pronouncement.

“Stop, please, stop. It’s not funny at all. You’re going to cause problems.”

“Show me where there’s a collector around here.”

Raji looked into the shadows of the surrounding countryside. His eyes hovered over the jokester’s companions, who had all stayed in their saddles, at the edge of the shadows, and didn’t look like they wanted to intervene. The rain seemed to be the least of their worries. In fact, they were already soaked to the bone.

The little man ran his hands through his gray hair one more time, unable to tame it. He cursed Dona, the goddess of merchants, who didn’t seem to be on his side this night. “What have you gotten yourself into anyway?” he asked, embarrassed. “Did you kill someone?”

“You guessed it,” the other one responded. “The Count of Kolimine.”

“What?” Raji exclaimed, his eyes bulging with fear.

“And his dog. I really regret having to kill the dog.”

The smuggler stared at the young man dumbly, not knowing if he should believe him. He had been the victim of Rey’s comedy acts many times before.

One of the horsemen separated from the rest of the group and approached them. Raji stiffened and put his hand on the handle of the dagger at his belt, just as he realized, not without surprise, that the horseman was a horsewoman.

She stated calmly, “Master Raji, we have no intention of bringing you trouble. We simply would like to take shelter from the rain, and give one of our own, who is slightly ill, a chance to rest. I would be grateful if you offered us your hospitality.”

The diminutive man, turned suddenly shy, hopped from one foot to the other in nervous thought. His “clients” were rarely this respectful. The

whole affair didn't please him. It was obvious that these people were running from something dangerous, but he didn't know how to refuse them.

"Fine, fine. Just for tonight, that's it! And I don't want to see any of you walking around outside. Horses, men, women, children, you will all stay hidden right up until you leave. Now, I'm going to try to go back to sleep, if you don't mind. Rey, you know the way."

Rey wondered how Raji could sleep with the racket from the rain on his slate roof. He watched him disappear into the little house and close the door, and then he turned to the horsewoman.

"Corenn, your intervention vexed me," he said smiling. "I was not yet ready to show you how gentlemanly my friends can be."

Most of the other horsemen had dismounted. An armed man, clothed entirely in black leather, shouted at Rey, "What was that all about, that act about the collectors? You can't do anything normally, can you?"

*"Normally?"* What does that word mean, Grigán?"

"Cut it out with your nonsense. Where is the warehouse?"

"Not far. Follow me."

"Bowbaq fell asleep on his horse," remarked a young woman with dark hair.

"Poor horse. Wake him up, Léti," Corenn asked her niece.

The young woman gently shook the giant northerner's arm, and then more and more vigorously. Bowbaq looked enormous on his horse as he groaned something unintelligible while rubbing his eyes. Then he descended off his saddle, if that was the right word to describe the movement that brought him to the earth, which was barely a foot lower.

A young Kaulien-looking man approached Rey, who was leading the group. Yan, who normally had such an honest and open face, wore an expression of a secret conspirator that made the actor smile before Yan even asked his question.

"You've smuggled before?"

"I've done my share, yes. Like anybody who travels often, I think. You buy here; you sell there. No harm to anyone. Right, Grigán?"

"Maybe. I've done it on occasion. But at least I never needed a warehouse. Nothing premeditated or on such a large scale."

Rey didn't bother to respond. He preferred to not have to broach these snippets of his past in front of Corenn, Bowbaq, or Léti. He brought them to a wooden building that had all the characteristics of a stable and entered,

followed by his friends. Grigán left the door open, long enough for him to light an oil lamp by the feeble light of the crescent moon. Then he surveyed the place, as he always did.

“This isn’t very big, and the rain is leaking through all over,” Bowbaq commented with a sleepy voice.

Corenn replied, “We need some peace and quiet for a while. Your wound needs to heal.”

“But I don’t feel it anymore, Corenn,” he responded while gently massaging his side. He froze in the middle of his gesture, and then doubled over in pain. The horseback ride hadn’t made things any better. Grigán and Yan rushed over to hold him up.

“Rest assured,” Rey interrupted, “the warehouse is beneath our feet.”

He showed them the proof by pulling up an enormous trapdoor, which had been concealed beneath a thick cushion of moist straw. Léti gazed at the dark chasm opening near her feet.

“We’re going to spend the night *in there*?”

“I’ve done it before,” the actor responded. “It’s a lot more comfortable than it looks.”

Grigán objected, “I don’t like it. This Raji doesn’t really inspire much confidence. He could very easily lock us down here.”

“No such risk. It’s not just a cellar; it’s also the departure point for a tunnel that brings you straight to Lorelia. They don’t call Raji *The Ferryman* for nothing.”

The warrior mumbled away his doubts and walked down the shoddy stairs to have a look for himself. Bowbaq admired his courage, while Léti remarked with disgust, “It must be teeming with bugs down there.”

“Bowbaq surely knows how to convince those pests to leave us alone,” the actor said jokingly. The giant didn’t bother to respond. Rey didn’t seem to understand that Bowbaq’s erjak powers could only be used with mammals. He could never reach the spirit of some cockroach, reptile, or other primitive species. Even with a rodent, the connection was very difficult.

They patiently waited for Grigán, who was clearly taking his time, to come back. Finally, he returned.

“So?”

“It should work,” the warrior admitted almost grudgingly to Rey.

“I told you so. It’s clean, sufficiently ventilated, and very well isolated. Did you really think someone would leave a fortune of merchandise to rot in a grimy hole?”

They decided to settle in before wasting any more time. The horses were unsaddled and fed, and their loads brought down to the hiding place. When they had made their last trip, Grigán closed the trapdoor with an apprehensive frown. Afterward, he spent a good amount of time pacing about, smoothing his mustache. The warrior wouldn’t rest easy until they left the place.

Yan’s eternally curious spirit pushed him to explore the surroundings. It was a stunning cellar, both by its size and the obvious care taken in its layout. Even though the walls gently curved, the rooms were arranged in rectangles. All three rooms added together couldn’t have been smaller than forty by twenty-five yards.

The biggest section was the one situated right below the trapdoor. The walls there were rudimentary, simply supported with thick planks of hardwood. The ground was covered in a thin layer of fine sand, and the ceiling was reinforced with enormous crossbeams. Though the place wasn’t pretty, at least it felt like a solid shelter. Even the thundering rain was now only a distant murmur.

Torches had been installed along regular intervals. Grigán had already lit several, which gave enough light for them to appreciate the sight before them. Thousands of pounds of merchandise, most of it wrapped in cloth for protection, waited there: boxes of all sizes, chests, bags, and barrels. The items sat on shelves, or in niches carved out of the wall, or were simply piled on the ground in disorder.

A simple board separated the first room from the second, but the finishing of the smaller room was distinctly superior. The walls were completely built up, the ground covered by wooden slats, which made a more than respectable floor. The ceiling had been leveled out and whitewashed. Taken together, these touches gave the room sufficient insulation, making it easy to preserve the most perishable items. Rey suggested to his friends that they sleep there, but the decision had already been made.

Stored there were exotic vegetables and fruits, and Yan found them less interesting than the mysterious objects in the first room.



The last room was sealed off by a heavy oak door, furnished with an impressive lock. It was bolted.

“Do you know what’s in there, Rey?” Yan asked.

“Of course, I already opened it. It’s a tiny room. Raji stores his most valuable merchandise in there, as well as his own treasure. It’s obviously the main reason he was hesitant to let us in.”

Yan thanked the actor, cutting off the conversation. He was unsure if he wanted to know what Rey meant by “I already opened it.”

The last detail about the cellar was the famous tunnel to Lorelia. The entryway was usually blocked by a secret door secured by a wooden beam, but Grigán had cleared the way should they need an escape. The tunnel was large enough for three men to walk side by side without bumping into one another, though nothing guaranteed that it would remain that wide along the whole tunnel. Yan wandered down the tunnel a dozen yards before Grigán asked him to come back. Which immediately prompted Léti to rush after Yan, until she encountered a wizened old rat. She and Yan both returned of their own accord and asked that they close the door and seal it with the beam.

Bowbaq was already sleeping when Corenn and Léti installed a makeshift partition, using a curtain, and disappeared behind it, wishing the others a good night. Grigán made one last round and finally let himself rest a bit. Rey came back from the first room with a bottle of Junian wine, offered some to Yan, and then set about finishing it himself, following the young Kaulien’s polite refusal. He nodded off, shortly thereafter.

Yan dimmed the lamp and got comfortable, letting his mind wander as he waited for sleep to overtake him. It had been only two dékades since he had left his small, native hamlet of Eza. Since then, he had been insulted, knocked unconscious, robbed, hunted, and threatened with torture and death. He had taken part in several fights and had seen men fall to the ground, never to rise. He had rid himself of an enemy by throwing a rock at his face. Several times, he had narrowly escaped death. His close brush on the cliff was especially strong in his mind; he could still see Léti’s panicked expression, suspended forty yards above the reefs.

This memory snapped him out of his reverie completely. He had the impression of reliving it. His despair, his powerlessness... and then his sudden rage; his fierce desire to save her, as if every morsel of his being existed only for this reason. And he had succeeded. That had happened only

nine decadays ago. Not even a full day. His Will was still just as strong. Concealed, sleeping, but supreme. He knew he would never be the same, and yet not knowing what this meant, he still rejoiced in it.

Corenn had said that something had been triggered in him. That they would need to have a long conversation soon, that she would help him understand. He could barely wait.

Since the day before, they hadn't had any time for it. After escaping the trap sprung by the Züu on Ji, they had returned to Berce to collect their horses. Grigán chased away two thieves who were posted near their horses without even drawing an arrow. Bowbaq and Rey, who had been on foot until then, had stolen two horses from the assassins. Then the little group distanced itself from the dangerous village.

Choosing their itinerary had been a long discussion. Grigán grudgingly resigned himself to staying with Rey's so-called friend, someone whom the actor presented as being reliable and generous, a man of rare integrity. But the debate between the warrior and Mother Corenn surrounding their destination afterward had been long, very long.

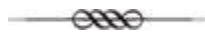
Once again it was Rey who came up with the idea. Lorelia was his hometown, and he knew it like the inside of his pocket. The Small Palace market was among those places he had come to know particularly well.

In the Small Palace all trade was unregulated, as long as the Crown was guaranteed a large commission on any deals and no one posed a threat to it. In this market, the heirs would be able to meet the Züu on neutral grounds. And perhaps barter for their safety.

As an accomplished diplomat, Corenn didn't want to overlook any bloodless opportunity to escape their sentence. Grigán absolutely refused to do business with the assassins and thought it would be less dangerous to jump directly onto an open blade than to meet with the Züu. For him, this idea was a complete folly.

For once, Rey kept himself from intervening in the discussion between the group's two leaders. Corenn had the last word, and the warrior spent the rest of the day brooding. He couldn't understand how the Mother could always get her way without even raising her voice.

The heirs were going to appear before the Züu. Yan's last thought before falling asleep was to wonder if that was really a good idea.



Léti opened her eyes slowly, surprised for a moment that she couldn't see the bright sun, before remembering that they were underground. Even though it was almost pitch-black—the only light source, an oil lamp, was blocked by the curtain—she could tell that the day had begun.

She stood and stretched languorously. Corenn was not yet awake. Léti skirted around her sleeping body, quickly slipped on some clothes, and ventured out from behind the hanging curtain. After barely more than four steps, Grigán shot up from his bed, blade in hand. She signaled to him that it was she, and the warrior lay back down with a surly grumble.

She approached Yan on her tiptoes. He was still sleeping, like Corenn. She remembered the faintness that had taken over his body, after his intense effort to save her. His rest was more than merited. Léti sat next to him and watched him with a tender, pensive face. Yan hadn't asked for her Promise, which meant he didn't love her. But he was still her friend, and she owed him her life. Even if she had to marry someone else now—Rey's image furtively caressed her mind—Yan would always be her best friend.

Leisurely, Léti lay next to him and let herself be soothed by comforting images of the future. Her and Rey, Yan and a woman of his choosing, happily discussing their children's personalities, and those of the other heirs.

She couldn't help but remember the reality of their situation, and it blighted her dreaming. This future, the Züu wanted to take it from them. They had already taken so many dreams, from her, her friends, and from all the other heirs. Unconsciously, her fists clenched and her body stiffened. She wouldn't let them. Never again.

Falling back asleep, she dreamed of three jeering and menacing warriors. One would lose a hand, the other an eye, and the last would fall into the abyss with her.

The nightmares that came after this one seemed almost pleasant.



Raji the Ferryman had a very bad night. The sun had risen and the rain had calmed before he managed to fall asleep. He finally succumbed to fatigue, only to wake up in the middle of the third deciday, too late, much too late in the day! He ran over to the warehouse without even taking the time to dress himself. The fact that the strangers' horses were still there wasn't enough to

calm his worries. Any smart thief would have preferred to leave their horse and reach Lorelia underground with his treasure!

After removing the moist straw covering from the trapdoor, he pulled on the ring that would open the door. It didn't budge an inch. He tried one more time, pulling with both hands, but with no more success than the first time. He knelt and pounded on the wood, calling for Rey with his strongest voice, already convinced that the cellar was empty.

Against all his expectations, he heard someone rapping on the door in response, and the door opened. Raji dove down the stairs faster than a startled animal running from its prey.

"Why did you lock it?" Raji screamed at the actor.

A blade appeared at his throat just as an iron grip pinned his arm behind his back. The smuggler didn't make a move, settling for a frightened glance at the young blond man in front of him.

Rey pretended to be annoyed, looking at the shadow that had slipped behind Raji.

"Grigán, what will our host think? That we are thieves? I only borrowed a few bottles, and that was only to staunch a truly inhuman thirst. Raji, you wouldn't hold that against us, would you?"

"No, of course not."

"Quit playing," Grigán ordered. "Go and take a look around upstairs to make sure everything's all right."

Rey quietly climbed up the stairs, smiling at Raji's sloppy attire. The smuggler was only wearing a simple cloth wrapped around his waist, of questionable freshness, but that was the least of Raji's worries compared to the cold steel he could feel on his throat.

Attempting to jest as he opened the door, Rey cried out, "Grigán, wait! Don't let him go, we're surrounded by a gang of ducks armed to the teeth."

Grigán let out a resigned sigh and freed Raji, who quickly put a respectable distance between himself and the warrior. All of his "guests" were now staring at him from the doorway to the second room. Two women were among them. The smuggler had never felt so uncomfortable.

"It's beautiful weather," Rey announced, returning from his inspection. "It's going to be a beautiful day."

"So much the better, so much the better," Raji mumbled awkwardly. "You will make good time, so..."

Rey interrupted him, putting his arm around his shoulder, “Come now, old friend, you’re not going to throw us out already!? Our companion over there is hurt and needs his rest.”

“Ow!” Bowbaq moaned in poor parody of someone suffering from stomach pains. Then he folded over, the pain from his wound truly awakened this time. Corenn helped him to his bed.

“Wouldn’t that be against all the fraternal laws of the Guild?” Rey asked.

“Um, as a matter of fact, I have a feeling the Guild wouldn’t be too happy to know that we’re friends.”

“What? You mean to tell me that you are scared of those little hoodlums, a famous crook like you?”

Rey grabbed him by the towel covering his body and shook him firmly, as if they were two old accomplices. Raji did his best to keep himself covered in front of the young woman, who found all of this very amusing.

“All right! All right!” He finally gave in, mortified. “Stay as long as you want, I don’t care! Only, it will cost you five terces per person per day. And I don’t want to see you rummaging through the merchandise!”

“Five terces! But we could just rent a princely inn at that pri—”

Grigán cut Rey short, “We will pay, and you won’t have any trouble... as long you don’t give us any.”

Raji observed the serious face of the Ramgrith warrior, agreed, and climbed the stairway as fast and dignified as he could. He promised himself to not give any offerings to Dona for several dékades.



The Small Palace market took place on the seventh day of each décade. It was only the fifth of the décade of the Bird. The meeting was only two days away. Nevertheless, “since everyone seemed determined to go through with this crazy plan,” Grigán wanted to get a look at the place and study it before the crowds invaded. Thus, an excursion to Lorelia was on the agenda for the day.

Of course, this didn’t involve everyone. Bowbaq had to rest and would spend the day in bed. Corenn would stay at his side, even though the only one who had much knowledge in the art of healing was the veteran, Grigán.

Corenn asked Yan to stay behind with them too. The young man understood that they were going to have their *big conversation*. He accepted, wondering why he suddenly had a pit in his stomach.

In fact, for the safety of his companions, Grigán didn't want to bring anyone along. Léti and Rey launched into a memorable chain of protests and arguments that were hardly convincing. The warrior eventually conceded to the actor's point that he might need a guide in the largest city of the known world. But Grigán knew better, that despite Rey's lack of respect for authority, he could indeed prove useful. Grigán knew Rey to be rebellious enough to accompany him anyway, regardless of what he decided.

But he didn't give in to Léti, and the tone of the conversation was on the verge of escalating at any moment. Finally, the warrior settled it by promising Léti a first combat lesson in the near future. Léti pretended to think about it for a moment, but accepted without the slightest objection. The warrior avoided meeting Corenn's disapproving eyes and left to prepare.

It was out of the question to walk around Lorelia with their everyday clothing. Naturally, for a disguise Grigán planned to simply cover himself in a large black cape of light fabric. Rey promised he would make himself unrecognizable, grabbed his pack, and slipped behind Corenn's improvised curtain.

He hadn't yet reappeared when Raji made another appearance in the warehouse. This time the little man was decently dressed and an authentic Goranese broadsword hung from his belt.

Grigán could tell by experience that the little smuggler wasn't used to carrying a weapon. His blade's poorly laced sheath shifted around uncomfortably, and Raji repeatedly had to reposition it upright. He even managed to trip over it, barely catching his fall by clinging to a basket full of Wastille pears, ending his stumble in an amusing posture.

The little man pretended to ignore the presence of the strangers and proceeded to take his usual inventory of goods that were to be "ferried" that day. After consulting one or another of his crooked record books that he kept in pristine condition, he placed this or that basket, chest, barrel, or other eccentric container in the middle of the first cellar. When he judged the pile sufficient, he went to the stable and came back pulling a donkey by the reins, dragging the poor animal down the stairs. Although he had

certainly managed the maneuver hundreds of times, it now felt like a challenge.

At that precise moment, Rey decided to unveil his disguise. Or at least the person who must have been Rey, since he had after all disappeared behind the curtain a full centiday before. His companions experienced a moment of hesitation. Grigán's reflexes took hold faster than his reason, and he assumed a combat position before recognizing him as their friend.

The actor had disguised himself as a Zü with a red tunic, a thick rope as a belt, and laced shoes. A partially open novice's robe covered the whole outfit. And most notably, the sinister dagger, the *hati*, easily recognizable in its crimson sheath.

All of the red killers they had ever encountered were bald, but Rey had no desire to take the costume that far. He had simply pulled back his thick blond locks in a ponytail and pulled up the hood of the novice's robe. Even his face disappeared in the shadow.

The effect was striking. Just the sight of the costume gave Léti a ferocious, even animal desire for savagery.

"Where did you get that?" asked Corenn.

"Off a Zü's back. The one who was waiting for me at Mess's house, to be exact. Obviously, I sort of had to kill him before he let me take it."

Someone let out a scream of terror, and the heirs turned toward Raji. The smuggler was attempting to flee but found the stairway blocked by the donkey. The poor animal had no choice but to leap down the stairs four steps at a time to avoid falling.

Soon Raji was out of view, and they could only hear his frightful screams becoming more distant. Grigán sighed before dashing off in pursuit, like a cat chasing a mouse, showing his exasperation with a few choice obscenities. Yan would not have liked to be in the little man's place.

They waited a few moments for the warrior's return. Rey tried, unsuccessfully, to get a laugh out of his companions with a series of cruel, bloodthirsty scowls. He changed register and squeezed a grin out of Léti as he mimicked a stupid-looking Zü drooling like a toad.

Grigán returned soon after, prodding Raji forward with one hand while holding his broadsword in the other. The little smuggler was so pale that they could almost see his tongue through his cheeks. "I suggest we either lock him up or get out of here," the warrior shouted. "I've had enough of this."

“Go ahead and leave, please...” murmured Raji.

“Confining our host is not an option,” Corenn asserted. “My lord, Raji was just surprised by Reyan’s disguise, isn’t that right?”

“Well... the Züu are quite ruthless, you know? I wouldn’t want them to come sticking their noses around here...”

“That won’t happen,” Grigán declared, handing him back his broadsword. “So long as you hold your tongue.”

“It’s true,” Corenn added. “At this point you would be considered our accomplice if they came to find out where we are...”

“Oh, my... oh my...”

The little man took his head in his hands and paced around aimlessly. The calm universe he had built for himself had just come tumbling down.

“Fortunately, we will be gone from here before the eighth day of the dékade. You’ve saved our life, my lord Raji.”

Raji stared at the Mother, shrugged his shoulders, and with a dispirited air began loading the donkey with his pile of goods.

Yan admired the way Corenn had just assured Raji’s loyalty. The art of diplomacy could really be more effective than force. He had been convinced of it for some time, but it was always nice to see it in action.

All attention fell back on Rey. He had prepared an army of arguments to convince Grigán that his disguise had merits, but he didn’t have to use them. The warrior made no comment. This visit to Lorelia, to their enemies, was surely dangerous. So if the outfit could help keep bystanders at a distance, it would be perfect. Of course it would be a completely different matter if they were to end up face-to-face with the genuine red killers. Such an encounter was destined to end in a fight.

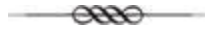
When Raji finally grasped that the strangers planned to accompany him in the underground tunnel, he only emitted a weak protest, more like a whine. Then he set off into the tunnel, pulling his donkey by the reins and sadly shaking his head. Rey grabbed a torch and followed after him, while Grigán brought up the rear.

With each step the actor felt the wicked dagger pounding against his thigh. The red tunic rustled constantly, and the heavy novice’s robe quickly induced a sweat. He was dressed like a Zü killer, and he could be heading right for them. A face painted with a skull came to haunt his thoughts and reminded him of the nearly fatal assault to his throat. He owed his survival to mere chance. Despite his swagger, the actor was full of apprehension. As



Yan closed the gate behind them, he wondered if the infallible Grigán was in the same state of mind or if the warrior truly was crazy enough to not fear anything.

He couldn't decide which bothered him more.



Bowbaq wanted to get up and wish his friends good luck before they left, but as he stood, the pain promptly assaulted him, taking all his strength to hold back a cry. The worst wasn't the pain, it was wondering if he was going to live. He had taken a dagger in his stomach. He'd suffered much more dangerous wounds before, some of them stemming from his occasionally brutal games with Mir. The lion had broken his wrist, two fingers, and almost gashed his throat open during a particularly savage battle, when the beast had nearly forgotten whom he was fighting.

But this new wound had been made with a poisoned blade. Though Corenn was perfectly confident he would heal, Bowbaq could see the end coming. He asked himself what had brought him here. So far from his children, so far from Ispen, his beloved wife, threatened as much by the Züu as he was, just like Prad and Iulane, and all his friends too. And the heirs still had no idea why, or how to fix it.

The night before, he found himself standing in a cave on a small isle in the Median Sea, and he was shown a portal to another world. A magical portal. The secret of Ji.

That night, while sleeping, it all became clear to him. He realized he must be the only one of his companions to have any idea what this other world could be.

He tried to forget it, but couldn't. If he survived his wound, his life would never be the same. There would be a *before* Ji. All that he would learn and know now would be *after*.

His wound shot such pain through his stomach that he thought he would never sleep. While his body needed rest, his mind was too stimulated; it needed relief too.

He suddenly had an urge to talk to someone. He wanted to talk about his possibly pending death, his family, his existence. To discuss the Züu—their enemy—and the mysteries of the island. He wanted to share, one more time, this experience with someone. A friend. One of the heirs.

He opened his eyes to see the torches' dancing lights on the cellar ceiling. Léti was crouching next to him and gave him a kind smile. The giant breathed a thankful sigh, cleared his voice, and began to tell his story.



From the moment Grigán and Rey left, Corenn had been directing her gaze toward Yan, her intelligent eyes gleaming into his for a long time. The young man immediately felt uncomfortable. Or rather in awe.

Throughout his childhood, the Mother had been nothing more to him than one of Léti's few relatives who occasionally came for a visit to Eza. He later learned that Corenn wasn't really the young girl's aunt, but a cousin of Norine, Léti's mother. Later still, once he was grown up enough to understand in broad terms the organization of power in the Matriarchy, he realized that Corenn was one of the most important people in the country.

He couldn't remember his impression of her from before, but from that day on, he saw her as more stern, more serious, and more responsible than anyone he'd ever known. Intimidated, he had more or less fled during her visits. Corenn only stayed in Eza for short stints, anyhow. Every three years, she would take Norine and Léti to Lorelia for a few days. Yan had never asked why because he knew Léti would keep her secret.

Well, now he knew. Over the past two dékades, he had gotten to know Corenn and learned to appreciate her. The Mother's numerous qualities, her intelligence just one of them, made her likable to anyone. If he were asked who was the most fit to lead the group, Yan would not have suggested Grigán. Despite the warrior's experience in traveling and fighting, he was too stubborn and withdrawn. Yan would have answered Corenn, without hesitation.

The young man thought he knew more or less everything there was to know about Corenn, but now the Mother of Kaul's Permanent Council was staring at him with an odd, scheming look that gave him the chills. She had promised him a long conversation. The moment had come. Yan understood without her having to say a word. He looked around to make sure he wouldn't forget anything, unsure why he was acting this way. Then he shrugged his shoulders and followed the Mother to the stable.

He felt just as nervous as the night before, when they saw the *other world*.

The memory of the lush sun-laden valley made him sad, just as he felt when the portal closed, sealing off its secret. He now understood that he would never be the same.

“What about Bowbaq?” he mumbled timidly, as if he were talking to a stranger.

“He’ll be fine. Léti is keeping an eye on him. I changed his bandages earlier; his wound is very clean, and I don’t think we have to worry about the poison anymore.”

The harmless tone in her voice relaxed him some, but the Mother’s pensive expression made him feel anxious again. They left the stable and walked in silence. The sun was already high above the horizon, and the Lorelien countryside rejoiced. The songs of vorvans and vulturous blackbirds fused together in the air. The hoarse cry of a marine pheasant echoed nearby, and wild boar answered promptly with a groan. The fauna sensed the approaching season of the earth and intended to make the most of the respite the sun now offered.

Yan enjoyed imagining how scared to death Raji would be, knowing that his guests were outside in the open, easily seen and acknowledged by any passerby. He wasn’t completely comfortable with the danger they imposed on the little man, but he knew that Grigán would rather die than cause an innocent man trouble. Besides, the smuggler would surely be handsomely compensated.

Corenn remained silent. Yan gathered his courage and dove in.

“This *long conversation*, does it have to do with the island, or me?”

The Mother smiled, shooting him a sidelong glance, as their walk brought them under the first trees of a thick forest.

“Yan the Fisherman, you’re not so naïve anymore,” she said magisterially. “It has to do with you,” she added, after a moment.

Yan felt his neck stiffen. He had suspected the answer, but was already sorry to have been right.

Corenn drew in a long breath and began.

“After what you saw yesterday, I don’t think you’ll find my question too odd. Yan, do you believe in the *impossible*?”

“Yes, of course,” he answered without hesitation. Then he felt the need to explain his impulsive response. “I mean, I’ve seen it, haven’t I? We all have. Anyone can go around saying things, but that doesn’t prove anything.

But yesterday... I was there yesterday. I saw the portal. I saw the other world. And if those things are real, then others can be too.”

Corenn stopped and stretched as she observed the surroundings. His answer amply satisfied her.

“Well! Like I thought, this is going to be very easy. Let’s stop here for a moment. I have something to show you.”

Consumed with curiosity, the young Kaulien squatted in the grass still moist with dew. Corenn unfolded a cloth she had brought for this purpose, sat down on it, and rested her back against the trunk of a young lubilee tree. She lazily took a coin from her purse and held it out to the young man.

“Place it on the ground upright, on its edge. Wherever you want, but close enough so that I can see it.”

Yan obeyed, wondering where the Mother was going with this. If Rey had asked him to do something like this, he would have refused to play along, afraid the actor was playing another one of his jokes on him.

“Now back up. And watch the coin closely.”

With no idea what was going on, Yan watched the engraved, metallic disk intently. It was a completely ordinary three-queen coin from the Matriarchy, tarnished by old age. Hardly valuable enough to buy a loaf of bread.

As he was watching it, the disk wavered, and then fell to its side. Yan immediately bent down and placed it back on its edge, and began to observe again.

“Did you see?” Corenn asked.

The Kaulien stared at her, confused. He hadn’t seen or understood anything at all.

“All right. Let’s try again. Look at it more closely,” she added with a mischievous smile.

Yan knelt next to the coin and concentrated all of his attention on it. He didn’t see a thing.

Then the object vibrated slightly at its base, as if touched by a breeze. Yan expected to see it fall again, but nothing happened.

Then the coin started to turn in a slow spinning motion that accelerated, faster and faster. When the coin first began to turn, Yan thought it was just coincidence, a trick of the wind. It continued to spin, faster and faster, and Yan knew this was no accident. What he was witnessing before

him was *impossible*. And whereas someone else might have run off screaming in fear and anger, he felt an inexplicable joy wash over him.

He took his eyes off the coin and looked at Corenn, not understanding why he was smiling so much. Regaining some of his seriousness, he noticed the Mother looked very focused. She would not take her eyes off the coin, and Yan finally understood that Corenn was the source of this wonder. Corenn was a magician!

He refocused on the little three-queen coin, now spinning so fast that it looked like a solid metal sphere. Then the little bead lifted into the air.

The young man watched, mouth agape. The spinning globe froze two feet above the ground, practically right in front of his eyes. He watched it turn from every angle until he couldn't resist the urge to wave a hand underneath it. When he did, his fingers met no resistance and the spell was in no way interrupted. The coin continued to spin.

He finally put both hands around the coin, cupping it like a firefly. The movement slowed, and the three-queen coin gently laid to rest in his left palm. Yan opened his hands, and contemplated the coin as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Corenn placed a hand on her forehead and closed her eyes for a moment. She suddenly seemed exhausted. She let her head rest against the tree trunk before turning to Yan with a wry smile.

"So did you see something this time?"

"I didn't see a thing," Yan said with a smirk. "Just an old coin spinning in midair, that's all."

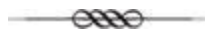
The two of them, usually so reasoned, succumbed to a fit of laughter: one that they could not justify or stop. Once they were both exhausted, they let a moment of silence go by, and listened to the songs of the forest.

Yan looked at the coin and Corenn, from Corenn to the coin, not knowing where or when the next wonder would occur.

"So, Yan the Fisherman," the Mother interrupted. "Do you believe in magic?"

"Yes," he answered very seriously.

"Good. Do you want to learn it?"



Grigán couldn't wait to get out of the tunnel. It wasn't so much being underground that bothered him. He had experienced that heavy feeling many times before, like in the caves on Ji. No, it was more the narrowness of the tunnel. Although there was plenty of space, even in the tightest sections, for two adults to walk side by side, the warrior felt hemmed in. He was thinking about the possibility of an attack.

In such a corridor, it would be tough for him to effectively use his four-foot-long blade. The dagger would be his best option, but he didn't trust it one bit, thinking its use too dangerous and barely effective against several enemies at once. The bow would have been ideal if the tunnel were lighted. But the three men navigated the tunnel by torchlight alone. Any determined enemy, hiding in the shadows, would be discovered only after it was too late. They were easy targets, so Grigán walked with his shoulder against the wall.

Moreover, he hated being led by a stranger, trusting a man who had so little reason to help them. For this tunnel wasn't just a passage that led from Raji's farm to Lorelia, it was one of the many veins in a genuine underground network, which must have spanned several leagues. They had already intersected six secondary tunnels, all of which had been walled off. So the route was obvious, but there was no guarantee it would be that way for the entire length of the passage.

Grigán slipped by the donkey, which was weighed down by merchandise, to walk next to the smuggler. Raji tried to ignore him, but his worried face made his discomfort obvious.

"How old is this tunnel?"

Raji stared at the warrior, as if assuring himself that Grigán's attempt at conversation wasn't some kind of bait. Grigán's impassive face comforted him a little.

"I'm not sure. My grandfather used it in his time, so at least fifty years old. When I was digging my third cellar, a few years ago, I found the tip of a Rominian lance. The tunnel might date all the way back to the Epoch of the Two Empires."

"That would be more than eight eons," Rey interrupted, "That's a lot."

Grigán continued, "And your family has been smuggling this whole time?"

"Since my grandfather," Raji proudly responded, falsely assuming the warrior's opinion. "But no one has been as successful as me!"

“Surely one of these days you’ll get caught, it seems too easy,” Grigán answered without animosity.

“Raji gives a portion of his profits to his collector. I’ve heard he’s very generous,” Rey chimed in.

Raji grumbled, “Why don’t you scream it on the rooftops?”

“Where do the other tunnels go?” Grigán asked.

“To Lorelia, like this one, or somewhere nearby. What does it matter? Most of them are either caved in, or too well known, even by the militia. My grandfather must have dug for six years to clear out this one. I walled off all the ones that fed into it many years ago. I’ve never had any worries, before you showed up.”

“Someone bold and even just halfway clever could knock down one of these walls and rob your warehouse.”

Raji raised his eyebrows. The ideas pouring out of this Grigán didn’t please him at all. He grumbled, “You can’t trust anyone.”

Rey burst out laughing and whooped for a good moment. Grigán found it oppressive to hear such idiotic chortling in this sordid underground. He began to regret bringing the actor along.

“Rey told me that the tunnel opens into the cellar of an inn. Is it yours?”

“I’m not sure I want to answer any more of your questions. You can stay in my warehouse, you can come along with me against my will, but I have no obligation to make conversation with you.”

The little man had gathered up all his courage for this tirade and mentally prepared himself to deliver a barrage of insults should Grigán touch him.

Rey burst into a new round of hysterical laughter. *These people are demented*, Raji thought.

Grigán had a furious urge to pin his blade to the foul-smelling man’s throat to find out what he wanted. He held himself back only once he considered Corenn’s wishes.

“I just wanted to know,” he whispered with a self-restraint he didn’t know he had, “if we are going to surface in the middle of a group of *brothers* who will immediately rush to warn the Guild.”

“Well, there’ll be brothers all right,” Raji joked.

Seeing the warrior’s icy stare, he quickly added, “I mean, just my associate and his two stooges. Good people, no need to fear, master

Grigán.”

The warrior stared at the little man for a while, without saying a word. This idea was nothing but madness.



In his weakened state, and wanting to express the full complexity of his emotions, Bowbaq sometimes had trouble finding the right words in the Ithare language. The others had a better command of the religious dialect than he. That had never been an issue... until today.

Léti patiently waited for him to sift through his thoughts or search for a new turn of phrase when he got stuck on an expression. In any case, she understood perfectly what he wanted to share with her. She had felt the same thing since the Züu had surrounded her and her aunt on a dirt trail in Eastern Kaul.

Bowbaq feared death. Or rather he feared a death by assassination, death at the hand of unknown warriors, unknown murderers whom he'd never wronged. He dreaded leaving this world in such a senseless way.

The giant was distraught.

“In the end, animals are more civilized than humans,” he announced, staring at the ceiling. “When they kill, it’s to nourish or defend themselves, or to protect their territory and their babies. Mir would never attack a stranger simply because I asked him to, or even in exchange for a reward. Animals have more *morality*.”

“You didn’t used to think so!”

“No,” he sighed. “The erjaks of Arkary are convinced that humans are the absolute master of all species. Because they can make things and have ideas... umm... that direct their actions...”

“Ideals?”

“Yes. Ideals. So I believed what they told me. But now, I think erjaks are wrong.”

“Animals defend themselves,” Léti added with a ferocious gleam in her eyes. “They fight their enemies even if the battle is lost before it starts. I think there’s a lesson to be learned from that too.”

Bowbaq didn’t immediately respond, letting the silence hang.

“I don’t know,” he finally admitted. “Erjaks also think that humans are superior because they can often solve their problems without using force.



Maybe that's true."

"But the Züu are killing us! Without hesitation! Are we supposed to just let that happen?"

"I don't know," the giant repeated.

Léti was dismayed. To her the answer was obvious.

"Your lion Mir wouldn't hesitate for an instant. He would take his enemy to the ground and rip his guts out. No remorse."

Bowbaq closed his eyes and relived that snow episode with the three corpses as vividly as if he had just left them there. He couldn't overpower Mir the lion's instinct, an error to which a master trainer would have never succumbed. Three men dead by his fault, without him knowing why. Three young men. His son Prad would be the same age as them in hardly ten years.

"All right, I admit that you have to defend yourself," he finally said. "But I don't want to kill. I could never kill."

"I could," Léti concluded with conviction. "I will. Without hesitation. And even more, I hope I have the chance to soon."

The conversation slipped into a long moment of awkward silence. They both understood in the future that it would be best to avoid this subject. Bowbaq decided to move on right away.

"I can't stop thinking about what we saw yesterday. The portal... you too?"

Léti gave a silent nod, thinking back on the emotions she felt as she watched the miracle. First, she was frightened. Then elated. And finally sad.

Only this last emotion survived now. The whole group had suffered an inexplicable moral ache, like a shallow and incurable cut in the smooth peacefulness of their minds.

No one complained. No one regretted it. But no one was satisfied.

"What do you think it is?" Léti asked. "I mean, what do you think is on the other side?"

The giant thought for a moment before responding. This was the very subject he had wanted to talk about since the beginning of their conversation, but he was reluctant to be the first to bring it up.

"In my clan's... uh... beliefs, there are several legends that could explain it," he stated, cautiously.

"Aunt Corenn said that it might be a sort of paradise. A place where the spirits of the dead go."

“Uh... I was also told something like that when I was young. I hope that she’s right.”

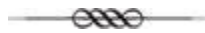
Léti saw something strange in her friend’s face. Something was worrying him. Something important.

“Bowbaq, what do you think it is?”

The giant sat up to rest his back against the wall and a grim expression came over his face. He had had more than enough of lying down. He gave Léti a penetrating stare that reached into the depths of her somber eyes. This time he didn’t have any trouble finding his words.

“Since yesterday, I’ve had this feeling that I’d already seen the *other world* before. As if I knew what it was. Last night as I was asleep, I remembered that someone had described it to me once. Not an heir, a traveling Maz from Yoos who spent a season with my clan. I was still a little boy. He knew lots of stories and loved telling them. He may have invented some of them, but one of them frightened me in particular: one about demons. About the *land of demons*, to be exact. A place supposedly just as beautiful and peaceful as its residents powerful and cruel. A sunny valley covered in fruit trees, home to hundreds of affectionate animals, but from there the black gods cast their curses upon the world of men.

“I’m happy that no one was able to pass through the portal,” he concluded solemnly.



Yan fixed his gaze on Corenn for a few moments. If he hadn’t just witnessed the miracle of a coin rising in the air and spinning, he would have thought she was joking. Even now, he wasn’t sure.

*The Mother was offering to teach him magic!*

She had just proven the existence of this legendary power. Just seeing the wonder was exciting by itself. The fact that Corenn was one of those exceptional beings, capable of manipulating invisible and mysterious forces, would be an inexhaustible subject of conversation itself. Now, on top of all that, she was offering to share her knowledge. No wonder Yan was overwhelmed and couldn’t digest it all in a single morning.

Corenn waited patiently for his response, amused by the effect her question had. Yan opened his mouth, moved his lips, but couldn’t

pronounce a single word. He cleared his throat, and then settled for just a nod of his head, thereby signaling his answer: He accepted.

“Perfect!” The Mother responded simply, as if they were just deciding on a recipe for the next meal. “Well, we have a lot to go over.”

Yan fell to his seat on the still wet grass, hardly considering this inconvenience. From then on, Corenn had his complete attention. He still couldn’t believe that the Mother was really going to discuss magic with him, with the incredible intention of teaching him! He wondered to himself when the dream would end, when Corenn would confess, laughter on her lips, that this was all just a bad joke, but the dream persisted. He was almost as exhilarated as when he was in front of Ji’s grand portal.

“I should start by warning you. I’m still uncertain that I will be able to teach you anything. People gifted with the power are very rare, and those apt enough to control it, even more so. You could well be part of the first group, or you might not possess the power at all, like the majority of people. Prepare yourself now for disappointment.”

Yan nodded, the joy coursing through him hardly lessened. Never, in the course of his different apprenticeships, had he felt so much interest in the subject. He was already Corenn’s disciple, as sure as the sun would rise tomorrow. Out of boredom or necessity, he had been trained in ironworks, woodworking, gardening, and even fishing. He would learn magic with a passion. It was already a certainty.

“Do you know why I am even suggesting you try?”

Yan had not thought about it very much. His mind raced to the night on Ji and the unexplainable events on the island. An answer emerged through the fog, clear and obvious.

“It’s what happened on the cliff. Getting Léti off that ledge was impossible. Yet, I did it. She’s still with us.” He tried to finish with some modesty.

Corenn looked to be sizing him up and commented, “You are smart, Yan. Very smart. It took me a few days to realize that. And you have a great heart.”

The young man’s face went red. He wasn’t used to hearing compliments. What a shame that Léti wasn’t there to hear it! And Grigán too.

“Unfortunately, having these virtues proves nothing about the existence of your power. About your Will. Do you understand? It has

nothing to do with being intelligent or dumb, knowledgeable or ignorant, old or young, honest or without morals. It has nothing to do with being a woman or man either. You can, or you can't. That's it. And we can't do anything to change it. Do you understand?"

"There is nothing to be ashamed of if I don't have it, that's what you're trying to tell me?"

"Mother Eurydis, if all the people who had gone through the test had reacted like you, my life would have been much easier."

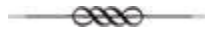
"A test?" Yan repeated. "What is this test?"

The young man was boiling over with impatience. The multiple warnings and Corenn's reluctance were starting to have an effect, and he found himself suddenly preparing for disappointment. He wanted to know and move on as fast as he could.

"I can't make guesses about your powers, if that idea has crossed your mind. The only way to prove the existence of your Will is to demonstrate it."

Corenn leaned over, took the three-queen coin from Yan's hands, and put it on the ground, standing straight on its edge. The young man dreaded what would happen next. He was right to dread.

"Your turn now; make the coin move."



Rey was trying to remember *why* he had been so intent on accompanying Grigán. Oh, fear wasn't the cause of his self-doubt, although he was a lot more scared than he would ever admit. No, it was the warrior himself who frightened him. Rey seemed of no use to Grigán, and the warrior wasn't making the slightest effort to be good company.

Even Raji's donkey was friendlier and a better conversationalist, he joked to himself.

Fortunately, they were almost at the end of the tunnel. Lorelia couldn't have been more than a league and a half from the smuggler's farm, but Rey felt like they had already walked three. He had long ago taken off his novice's robe, which had made him so hot that he was still swimming in sweat. Raji cursed the actor for removing the novice robe, since the Zü costume underneath made him excessively nervous.

The little man had stopped twice to repair sections of the ceiling that were threatening to cave in. Grigán had protested at length about this waste of time, but nothing could convince Raji to ignore his duty. He shook his head at each of the warrior's complaints, and kept on digging, nailing, and reinforcing the walls, pulling out the necessary materials from his donkey's cargo. Finally, a grumbling Grigán got his own hands dirty in order to speed things up. Rey refrained from helping them, claiming that he didn't want to soil his disguise. They resumed their walk in silence until Raji announced that they were near their destination.

Rey finally admitted to himself that he had only come because he didn't know what else to do. He had flirted with the idea of leaving the group to try his luck on his own in the Old Country, or elsewhere. But despite the unpleasant character of a few, the heirs were the first true friends he'd had in a long time. What they experienced on Ji united them for eternity. He realized that now, and it was a strange, disconcerting feeling. Rey had never before been bound to anyone.

Lost in his thoughts, it took him a few hundred yards to notice the changing slope of the tunnel and the improved finishing of the walls. The exit was near. He reluctantly slipped the novice's robe back over his Zü tunic.

Shortly after, the three men found themselves in front of a heavy hardwood door. It had no lock and looked a lot like the one in Raji's farm on the other end of the tunnel.

"How do we open it?" Grigán asked.

"We wait for it to disappear, and then we walk through it," Rey joked, referencing the wonder on the island of Ji.

The warrior shot him a dark, threatening look. Rey acknowledged that he may have gone too far. He had promised not to reveal the island's secret, and was determined to respect his promise at all costs. He gave Grigán a subtle apologetic gesture. It was the first time he had ever felt the need to apologize to someone.

Raji didn't notice a thing. He was busy repeatedly tugging on a hidden cord that stretched along the ceiling right next to the wall.

"What's that?" Grigán asked with a distrustful expression.

"It rings a bell above," Raji answered without pause. "To tell my partner to come down and open the door. It's true, I swear, you have my word!"

The warrior gauged the little smuggler in silence. A dagger had appeared in Grigán's hand as if by magic. Rey understood that if this were a trap, Raji would be the first to regret it.

The actor also prepared himself for the possibility, drawing a dagger. For a moment he thought about using the *hati*, but he pushed the idea away in disgust. His sense of morals, peculiar as it was, didn't allow him to use a poisoned blade.

A knot in the door disappeared, allowing a ray of light to pass through. An inquisitive eye appeared for a brief moment.

"Raji?" yelled a worried voice. "What's going on? Who are these guys?"

"Friends," Grigán responded calmly. "We're unarmed."

The warrior was discreetly holding Raji at knifepoint.

"How's it going, Bellec?" the little smuggler asked, cheerfully. As a connoisseur, Reyan admired Raji's acting performance.

The eye reappeared in the knothole briefly, quickly examining Rey and Grigán.

"Do we know each other?" Bellec questioned the strangers.

"We've done business together," the actor declared. "Through Raji. Do you remember the *centenarian's* liquor? I'm the one you ran it for."

The man behind the door remained silent. Nothing proved that the strangers were telling the truth. They could have extorted that information from Raji.

"Bellec, please open up," the little man groaned. "Everything's fine."

There was a renewed silence before Bellec complied and set about unblocking the door. The three men and the donkey quickly passed through the opening, under Bellec's worried watch.

He had the typical look of a Lorelien satisfied with his commercial success. Rather small and plump, with a tanned complexion from the sunshine of the southern Upper Kingdoms. His appearance was well kept, as was natural for any innkeeper or civilized trader, and it was obvious that he had never known hardship. But above all, Rey suspected he was nothing but an oafish, unsophisticated, crass man whose only concerns were monetary. *My fellow countryman*, Rey pondered in amusement.

After some quick introductions orchestrated by Rey, Bellec rushed to close the door, as if some more strangers were about to invade his cellar. It was a considerably smaller cellar than Raji's storeroom, but just as well

organized. The two smugglers went to work placing the goods on the shelves. Grigán waited for them before continuing on.

"I hope that you trust your friends, Raji," Bellec commented. "I myself have never shown our tunnel to anyone."

"My tunnel," the little man corrected.

"That ends in *my* cellar. Try to remember that in the future. And see to it that you spare me this kind of situation again."

Raji was about to protest that he hadn't had a choice, but let it go as soon as the thought struck him. No one ever listened to him anyway.

Once the stores were on the shelves, everyone moved into the side room, Bellec's real cellar.

Bellec concealed the door to his secret storeroom behind a large shelf unit, while Raji tied the donkey's reins to a ring on the wall designed for the purpose.

"It's the first time I've entered an inn through the cellar," joked Rey.

"Ha, ha, very funny," Bellec said with a sneer. "Mind you, it's also the *last* time. I run goods, not fugitives."

"Whoever said we were fugitives?" Grigán asked.

"Why didn't you go through the city gates?" the Lorelien countered.

"Point taken. Just know that we have nothing to be ashamed of."

"Of course. I couldn't care less what you've done. I don't want to see you in my cellar anymore, that's all."

"Well, we'll have to come back through this way."

"That's not my problem. If you want, I can open the tunnel again right now, and you could disappear. The tunnel is not a toll road."

Raji watched Grigán in anguish. It was all going to end in a fight, he was sure. But it was Rey who launched the attack.

"We could also leave here and go talk to the collectors," he threatened. "The Crown has no problem with us."

Bellec stared the young man down in disdain. This was a low blow.

"Come on, now," the actor continued cautiously. "We're only passing through."

Bellec didn't answer, instead shooting Raji a reproachful stare. He was left with no choice.

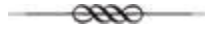
"Where are your men?" Grigán inquired, as they made their way up the stairwell.

"Who?"

“Werb and Micaeir,” Raji specified, just as curious.

“The Guild offered them a job in a little hamlet on the coast,” Bellec answered, directing his speech to his accomplice. “Rumor has it they’re dead. I hope it’s true. They picked up and left me without blinking an eye.”

Rey and Grigán exchanged a knowing look, and then followed the smugglers up the stairs toward Lorelia.



Bowbaq had finally fallen asleep. He and Léti had covered many topics, and the young woman had felt, yet again, her beliefs shaken.

She leaned over the giant, listened to his breathing, and found it peaceful, measured. Right then she decided that she could use a walk outside. Corenn and Yan had been gone for a while, and after what she had just heard, she had no desire to be left alone.

Outside she was still ill at ease. Even a few paces in the sunshine wasn’t enough to make her forget her fears, or even push them away temporarily into the future or the past.

She met up with Yan and Corenn as they were returning to the stable. Her friend had an odd look on his face, the one he always had when he was passionate about a new discipline. He couldn’t hide these kinds of things from her, she knew him too well.

The Kaulien gave her a smile as soon as he saw her. She felt a pang in her gut. Again, she mourned that Yan hadn’t asked for her Promise.

She tried to drown this thought. Yan didn’t love her, and that was that. It was only another worry among many.

As soon as they were within earshot, Corenn asked, “How is Bowbaq?”

“Good. He had trouble falling asleep, but he’s snoring now.”

“Is he in pain?”

“He grimaces when he moves, that’s all. He isn’t complaining, though.”

The three Kauliens faced each other, looking for a new topic of conversation.

“You took a long walk,” Léti commented.

Yan looked down and was suddenly very interested in giving his shoes an extended examination.



“Yes,” Corenn answered. “The forest is very beautiful, over there. Well! I am going to go look and see if we can’t find something to make dinner from master Raji’s stores. After all, at five terces per day, he can at least offer us some meals!”

They returned to the warehouse. Léti had the unpleasant feeling that they were hiding something from her. Her aunt only acted this way when she wanted to shelter her from bad news.

Léti had meant to speak with her about Bowbaq’s valley of demons. Now, she no longer had the heart.



Rey spent his first half deciday back in Lorelia watching the entryway of Bellec’s inn, the Rominian Pig, with Grigán as his lone and silent companion. The fact that the warrior didn’t trust the trader as far as he could throw him was easy to understand. Rey shared the same opinion. But to force him to hang around for a half deciday under the apogee sun, sweating like a pig in his heavy clothing, that was more than he could put up with.

After one last attempt to reason with the Ramgrith, Rey decided to go it alone and marched off with a determined step toward the old neighborhoods. Grigán caught up with him before he reached the street corner.

“You’re being too impatient,” the warrior started to lecture. “You don’t think before you act. You won’t live to be old.”

The actor retaliated with a mocking smile, “I prefer to live young, anyhow.”

He turned off into an alleyway, which better deserved to be called a hallway, crossed a square whose cobblestones were several centuries old, and then made his way up an avenue, obstructed by carts and mule drivers, hollering to be let by. Grigán doubled his efforts to not lose sight of Rey, all the while observing his surroundings. For the excessively cautious warrior, it was an incredibly taxing situation.

Only one thing played to their advantage: Lorelia was one of the last places in the world where the Züu might expect them. This slight advantage would be lost the moment they came across the assassins, though, and Grigán still had a hard time believing he had ever agreed to meet with the

red killers for a chat. Corenn, however, seemed determined to see it through.

She was counting on him to assure their safety. Of course he would do his best, but if the meeting turned sour, only luck could save them...

Rey started down another alleyway, continuing until he came to an intersection, where he waited for the warrior.

"The Kercyan house is two streets over in that direction," he said, pointing toward an arch that overhung a side street.

Grigán anticipated his next words, preparing himself for a ferocious argument in which he would forbid the actor from putting them all in danger for a petty whim. But Rey continued walking without adding anything more. There was no need to explain the situation to him. In any case, the actor had never really liked the shack, a genuine land of exile for his family. Now it was probably just making a homeless gang happy. He had no desire to see it again, much less to go inside.

The warrior doubled his vigilance in these neighborhoods that were once Rey's stomping ground. The actor, taking notice of Grigán's unwavering stare and sluggish pace, quickly showed signs of impatience. In the end, their walk, punctuated by meaningless quarrels, brought them to their destination.

The Royal Commerce Commissioner's Winter Palace, more commonly known as the Small Palace, took up the entire west side of the impressive Riders' Square. Every seventh day of the dékade, the square was host to the largest open market in Lorelia. At the same time that the usual market was open, the Small Palace was open as a bargaining site for deals, by and large illegal in nature, accessible to anyone the guards allowed in and who could pay the right of entry.

"We haven't talked about this yet," Rey said as they approached the building, "but it's really very expensive to enter."

"Just tell me how much," Grigán grumbled.

"Five hundred terces per person, no less. With or without a deal."

Grigán's expression grew even darker. This affair was going to burn quite the hole in their purse. Twenty golden terces per person? To talk with the Züu? He sighed loudly, shaking his head, and then resigned himself to examining the place.

Collectively, the warrior must have spent more than ten dékades in the merchant city. Without a doubt, he had walked through the square and along

the edge of the Small Palace at least fifty times. But today the structure took on an entirely new importance to him, and he began to intensely study and itemize its features in his mind.

The person who had renamed it was gifted with a certain sense of humor. If this palace was supposed to be small, it could only be so in comparison to the royal residence. The Small Palace reached a height of five floors, whereas few Lorelien residences had even four. And no less than eleven large windows could be counted on each level. The entire building could have easily housed twenty families.

The architecture was representative of Lorelia's grand buildings: pilasters, cornices, windows as high as they were narrow, little balconies. All built of solid stone from Cyr's quarries. The Small Palace was more than six hundred years old, but looked like it was completed no more than ten years ago.

The Royal Commerce Commissioner was no longer housed there, although the apartments remained. For two centuries, the greater part of the building had been home to the study halls of the kingdom's clerks: all the regular administrators, archivists, bureaucrats, scribes, managers, registrars, and others who were indispensable to the stability and prosperity of the merchant nation.

Entry into the palace was free, and every day hundreds of traders went inside to carry out certain obligatory declarations and procedures. The seventh day of the décade was the exception. On that day, only the clerks were permitted to enter, and those wishing to take part in the indoor market.

Grigán slowly followed Rey up the fifteen steps leading to the excessively decadent porch. A lone guard, who may have been sleeping, was supposedly monitoring the comings and goings between the entrance hall and the outside.

"During the market," Rey whispered in the warrior's ear, "the hall is guarded by six jelenis, the royal rank of dog masters. They always choose their most vicious dogs. No one could ever hope to enter or leave by force."

The narrow entrance hall led to a sumptuous receiving room, built entirely of embossed marble. At the entryway, they passed the desk of a drudge clerk, who paid them no attention.

"This is where you will pay the right of entry and surrender your arms," Rey explained, pointing toward the desk.

"Excuse me?"

“I can pretty well imagine how hard that will be for you,” chuckled the actor. “Just remember that the Züu will have to endure the same punishment.”

Two spiral staircases led to the upper floors. Rey dragged the warrior up the first one. They passed through a splendid arch and found themselves standing under a portico encircling a huge interior courtyard.

The courtyard most closely resembled a garden or a small park, full of lush flowerbeds and green fields. The illusion of wilderness had been pared back inside the courtyard, though, as none of the trees, flowers, bushes, grass, or ivy that grew there were truly wild. Everything was straight, trimmed, and “disciplined” according to mankind’s aesthetic needs.

A walkway snaked its way through this domesticated patch of wilderness, leading from one marble bench to another, as if the pedestrians would need to stop for a break every fifteen feet. Thick, judiciously arranged séda hedges acted as walls. Some of them served as partitions, too, creating small open-air lounges with tables, benches, and fountains.

“Here it is. This is where it all happens. The traders are free to walk around and sit where they like. Auctions and displays aren’t allowed, but I don’t think we’ll need that, will we?”

“I was under the impression you had never taken part. You seem to know your fair share about it.”

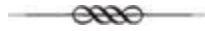
“Don’t forget that this is my hometown, Grigán. It’s only natural that I should know its ins and outs.”

The warrior nodded, observing the surroundings. “Anyone can come in here with a concealed weapon,” he commented. “We won’t be safe.”

“Of course, they expect this possibility. Archers patrol along the balcony above the portico. They’re under strict order to shoot anyone who brandishes a weapon. I think it’s happened twice over the past three centuries... anyway, technically I don’t think we’re supposed to be here. I’m surprised they haven’t kicked us out already!”

The warrior took one last good look at the place, taking note of the layout and distances in the space. There were only two possible exits: one via each staircase. The heirs would be in relative safety... assuming the Züu weren’t prepared to sacrifice themselves just to get to them, which he doubted they were.

“I’ve seen enough. Let’s get out of here before we’re noticed. A few more things to check out in the neighborhood, and then let’s head back.”



It was the first time in his memory that Yan had lied to Léti. It left a bitter taste in his mouth that even the joy from Corenn's recent revelations couldn't sweeten. Luckily, this betrayal was only temporary. The Mother had made him promise to keep their discussion secret until she told him otherwise. Yan imagined she would grant him that permission only after he successfully passed the "test."

He ate lunch with his companions, and then slipped away as soon as his manners would allow. Now, he was in the middle of the Lorelien forest, staring at a Kaulien coin, its former gleam dimmed and darkened by the years. Laying flat on his stomach, hands to his temples, he concentrated as hard as he could.

This morning's attempt hadn't lasted long. Corenn gave him some advice, and decided that it was time to go back. This was a test he had to face alone. He could end up devoting several *dékades* to the task before succeeding. Maybe even several moons. Years, even.

Yan couldn't imagine he would spend *that* much time staring at the coin. If Corenn had successfully managed the trick, it was because it was possible. Strange, certainly. Difficult, probably, but not insurmountable. As she had told him, the key was to believe.

Only, he didn't know where to start. Apart from fixing the coin with a stare that he hoped would make it fall over, he had no idea what to do. Having no other idea, he let his eyes focus on the coin for several centidays.

After a while, a new feeling seized Yan. He felt silly, which could be expected given that anyone who saw what he was trying to do now would think him crazy, but he quickly pushed the thought away. Corenn had warned him that he would have these feelings; it was normal. Anyone who didn't have these doubts would be the one who was truly crazy.

He refocused his attention on the metal disk. He already knew its every detail and could pick it out among hundreds of others. A third of the coin was well worn and had two nicks along the edge. He wondered if knowing such details could help him, or if they were just ruining his concentration. He once again realized that he didn't even know *how to* begin. How did magic work?

Corenn had told him that it was like a muscle of the mind, a muscle he had never used that would be difficult to awaken. Yan would be content just

knowing where he could find this “muscle.” She kept talking about Will, but the idea was still vague and strange. Yan wanted the coin to fall. *He wanted it to right now!*

The three-queen coin didn’t budge, with its worn pattern and rough edges. It stood proud and defiant. He cursed its creation, and shook his fists at it, mumbling all sorts of nonsense. Then he stood up, picked up the hated object, and headed back. He had wasted almost a deciday of his life staring at this piece of metal for nothing. It was a complete failure.

He would go at it again as soon as possible.



Yan came into the stable just as Raji was leaving. The little man was in a vile mood. He had waited for Rey and Grigán much longer than the two men had told him he would have to wait. Yan simply gave him a polite nod, preferring to let the smuggler ignore him.

His companions were already deep in discussion when he joined them. They were all sitting around Bowbaq’s bed in a sort of improvised meeting. Grigán filled Yan in on the basics of their trip, and then continued.

“Inside the Small Palace, I’ll admit, the danger is limited. But things will be altogether different as soon as we’re outside. The guards try not to let everyone leave all at once, but one or two Züu could easily follow us. It seems like an insufficient measure, considering that people like the Züu meet in there. Not to mention the Grand Guild, of course.”

“But the Züu aren’t expecting us,” explained Corenn. “I’m sure they haven’t planned an ambush of any sort, whether it be inside the building or at the exit. Unless they systematically prepare ambushes, of course, but nothing could justify that kind of excessive planning.”

“Unless they’ve been warned about us,” Grigán noted. “Those two minions of Bellec, Raji’s accomplice, were in Berce and might have died on the island. Or perhaps not... we could very well find ourselves face-to-face with them next time.”

“Two street thugs: We could get rid of them, no problem,” Léti intervened confidently.

Corenn’s eyes opened wide, scandalized, but Grigán responded before she could start lecturing.

“You really believe that? No one is ever victor before the fight even starts! No one. And even if that were the case, we wouldn’t be able to recognize those two. They could very well pretend to bow at our feet and then run off to fetch the Guild as soon as we turn our backs.”

Léti refrained from arguing. The warrior had promised to teach her how to fight. Until then, she didn’t want to do anything to upset him or make him change his mind.

The two leaders of the group picked up their conversation where they had left off. Grigán sighed before addressing the Mother with pleading eyes.

“Corenn, do you really think that it’s worth it? The Züu will never listen to us. It would be easier to have a conversation with a daï snake than with those maniacs. As soon as they see us, the only thing on their minds will be how to stab a dagger through our hearts.”

“I know, Grigán, I know. But, unfortunately, we don’t have many other options. If we cannot meet our *real enemy*, for lack of knowing who it is, we must try to stop the Züu’s wrath.”

The warrior locked eyes with his companions, one by one. He knew how it was to live as a hunted fugitive. He wouldn’t wish it on anyone. Besides, he didn’t think his friends could survive very long on the run, even under his protection.

He answered with a silent nod, but couldn’t hold back a scowl.

The discussion would have stopped there if Bowbaq hadn’t continued, in a concerned voice. “And if the Züu refuse to listen to us? If they want to hunt us to the end? I mean, what will we do then?”

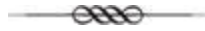
Everyone had been asking themselves these questions, but no one could offer any encouraging words to the giant, a father of a family.

“I think the best thing to do would be to go to the Baronies,” Corenn responded bleakly. “To Junine, to meet Queen Séhane. To our knowledge, she’s the only heir left alive besides us. Obviously, that wouldn’t bring you any closer to Arkary...”

Bowbaq was lost in thought. Three dékades before, his steppe pony, Wos, woke him up as he fidgeted in his pen. Now he was laid up in a Lorelien smuggler’s depot, his stomach wounded by a dagger. Soon he might leave for the Small Kingdoms. It had been two moons since he had seen his wife, son, and daughter. He wasn’t even sure they were still alive.

“All right,” he declared reluctantly. “If it settles things... we’ll go to Junine.”

Rey comforted him with a thump on the shoulder. The sight of such a nice, gentle soul gripped by melancholy saddened them all even more.



Léti wouldn’t let Grigán rest for very long. The warrior hardly had time to eat a light meal, which was already late, before Léti quickly reminded him of his promise. The first lesson would be today.

Grigán was a man of his word, like all his compatriots, and, even more generally, like all the natives of the Lower Kingdoms. While his education forbid him from letting a woman wield any weapon, his sense of honor, much more sacred in his eyes, forbid him from breaking his promise. Moreover, twenty years of traveling and various encounters had relaxed his faith in the rigid precepts embedded in Ramgrith traditions, and he had known dozens of women warriors.

“All right, let’s go,” he responded to the Kaulienne, whose face lit up. “We’ll do it outside.”

Léti almost ran to the stairs, only stopping for an instant to make sure the warrior was following her. From over her shoulder she could see that he was in the middle of a conversation with Corenn. Léti climbed the stairs, pouting, certain that her aunt was trying to change Grigán’s mind. She wasn’t mistaken.

Corenn told Grigán, “I have no desire to watch her run straight for a confrontation with the Züu. Please, try not to encourage her, Grigán. Don’t let her think that she could get the upper hand in a fight with them.”

The warrior looked hard at the Mother as if she had just insulted his ancestors and cursed his descendants all at once. Never had Corenn offended him so deeply. Speaking to him like he was irresponsible!

He clenched his jaw for a moment and then decided to let it go, blaming his reaction on the countless worries they were all dealing with. These last few days, they had all called him out for his oversensitivity. He wouldn’t get angry this time.

Before joining Léti at the stable’s entry, he managed the curt reply, “Don’t worry.”



He had expected that all the others would gather to watch the spectacle that this “first lesson” would provide, but Rey was the only one to join them. The actor stretched out comfortably on a hay bale, armed with a bottle of green wine he had snuck from Raji’s reserves to help him enjoy himself. Grigán was preemptively annoyed, waiting for the actor’s attempt at humorous jokes at Grigán’s expense. He decided to ignore the joker and concentrated on Léti instead.

The young woman was waiting impatiently for him to fill her in on some inside secrets of a veteran, but he had never taught anything to anyone. He had no idea what he was going to do. He even wondered, standing silently in front of her, what there was that he could say.

“The best place to start would be to give her a weapon, right?” Rey suggested, as if he had read his thoughts. That the actor had sensed his apprehension was enough to vex the warrior, who was already at his wit’s end.

Grigán grabbed his curved blade in a movement rendered natural by years of experience, and chained together a series of impressive jugglery. The warrior regretted it almost immediately. These types of performances were nothing more than useless bravado, and if he could master them, it was only because he had worn a sword since his youth. He had only wanted to prove that he didn’t need anyone’s advice, but that had been an error, because he was encouraging Léti to focus on weapons.

The young woman had watched his entire demonstration with admiring eyes. He was sure that she would attempt to imitate him as soon as she could. Damn!

“Well, what do you want to learn?” he asked her, suddenly in a rush to finish.

“All of it. How to wield weapons as well as you can. How to attack, deflect, and retaliate. All of it.”

“You can’t just learn it. It’s a question of experience.”

“So train me.”

The warrior thought for a moment.

“We’ll start with the bow.”

“Oh, no, I already know how to shoot an arrow. Teach me to use blades.”

Grigán shook his head. This was ridiculous. If it weren’t for his promise, he would have already turned his back on this rash young woman.

He swore to himself that there wouldn't be a second lesson.

Nevertheless, he conscientiously reflected on the best advice to give. Having his blade in hand reminded him of the numerous combats in which he had used it. Little by little, a few ideas came to him. He settled on one and congratulated himself for choosing a lesson that would surely discourage Léti.

He began in a serious tone, "Before anything else, you have to conquer your fear. Your fear of being wounded, of receiving blows to your face, your bones, your skin: damage that is most often irreparable. There are scratches, burns, bumps, but also deeper cuts, fractures, and tears. And there are worse wounds, you can be sure. One never leaves a combat unscathed. Never."

"I know. What else?"

Léti had faced these same realities on Ji. She was still suffering from them. If the warrior was trying to impress or scare her, he had failed.

"You don't understand. I'm not trying to tell you that you may get hurt. I should hope you already knew that! I'm saying that if you're afraid of that, if you fight to exhaustion to avoid a gash in your leg, you've already lost the battle. It's that simple."

"So?"

"So if you want to learn how to defend yourself—and I mean really defend yourself—you have to learn to keep the main goal in mind: to stay alive, and nothing else. Unless you want scars like mine, renounce this folly right now and let others worry about protecting you."

"Out of the question. Let's do an exercise. You'll see."

Léti caught him off guard. Grigán thought that such a tirade would have scared her, at least a little, but he was wrong. The young woman had something boiling inside her. He knew her sentiments only too well. He called it *the warrior's rage* and knew how dangerous a feeling it was.

Oh well, if she wanted to do an exercise, she would have one, he thought. A good lesson was precisely what they needed to set things straight.

"All right," he said while juggling his sword. "Attack me."

For the first time, Léti looked surprised. "Just like this? With what?"

"With nothing. Me, I have the sword, and you, you have no fear."

The young woman felt disheartened. She had never imagined it would be like this. But that didn't matter; if the warrior decided on an exercise, she

would yield to his wishes.

She tried to approach him from many different angles, but Grigán kept her a full blade-length away. She tried to surprise him with a rush, without any success. The warrior anticipated each one of her movements and protected himself behind his curved sword.

Léti was forced into attempting even more reckless attacks, running at him without worrying about the sharp steel, which was after all the moral of the lesson. But Grigán would easily sidestep her attacks, hardly restraining his curses at her carelessness.

Rey cheered her on, but there was no solution to this type of exercise. The warrior had simply wanted her to taste the bitterness of defeat, that's all.

Rage seized her. She had sworn to never back down. Sworn to be invulnerable.

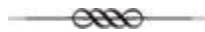
She faked another attempt, and was immediately foiled by the appearance of a steel point. Desperate, Léti grabbed the blade in a quick movement with her right hand.

Grigán's reflexes were fast enough to not pull the blade back, but Léti's blood already stained the metal between her gashed fingers.

The young woman reached out her free hand and slowly placed a finger on the paling warrior's heart.

"I won," she proclaimed.

Her voice trembled slightly.



Corenn was hesitant to watch Léti's lesson. She was curious—and nervous—about what was going to happen with Grigán and her niece, but at the same time didn't want to encourage the young woman with her presence.

In the end, Yan relieved her of the decision. All day the young man had attempted to complete the test, and, of course, had failed. When Léti, Grigán, and Rey left, he had asked the Mother if they could resume their *long conversation*. He had some more questions for her.

Corenn happily welcomed his suggestion. Even if she considered herself a Mother more than a magician, a subject like Will could always stir her interest. Even with a novice like Yan, she would still enjoy discussing it.

Bowbaq had nodded off again, as the calming concoction, per Grigán's recipe, took effect. Still, Corenn chose a spot far enough away from the cellar to avoid being overheard. She was keen on keeping their *long conversation* a secret, at least until Yan passed the test.

The reason was simple. If everyone knew what Yan was trying to do, the young man would never manage to focus for long enough to succeed. Pressure and anxiety would busy his mind, and he would fail. No, the Mother thought, right now, his Will was the only thing that needed stimulation.

Corenn prepared herself to answer all of his questions, and there were plenty.

"I don't even know where to start," he admitted. "I mean, I can guess that just waiting and waiting won't be enough."

"No, you're right. What have you been thinking then?"

"I get the feeling that I'm missing something... something that I should *do*, but I don't know what. It's like I have a fish on the end of my line and it's about to get away because I haven't set the hook."

"That's not too far from the truth. In fact, your Will should not be applied like a mindless, slow push. You must gather it up and then *unleash* it at the right time."

Yan waited for her to explain. Though her words may have been clear for a magician, they were just as obscure to Yan as the Rominian alphabet.

"You will understand once you've succeeded," she continued. "For now, don't clutter your mind with the mechanics."

The young man agreed, still unsure of himself. The subject had been closed much too soon for his liking. He still had other questions.

"The coin. I've looked at it so much that I have the feeling that I'm seeing it everywhere. I try to focus on it, but part of my mind is busy processing its physical characteristics."

"Then try focusing on those characteristics. Since all you're trying to do is make the coin fall, you can apply your Will to any place on the coin's surface. It won't make any difference."

Yan pondered the idea for a few moments. Corenn was aware that she was introducing many new concepts to the young man, and from a discipline he didn't even know existed until the day before. In doing so, she was changing the rules of her instruction.

In the past, she had always refrained from explaining the *principles* of Will before the novice had succeeded in passing the test. Her opinion had evolved with time: The principles could only help those who were already capable of succeeding. For others, they simply represented another false trail.

Yan had more questions.

“Do... it’s sort of strange to ask, but... do you need to make gestures, or anything like that? Do you need to say something?”

“It isn’t strictly necessary. But it helped one of my students in the past, so if you feel like you need to, don’t stop yourself. It’s just hard to shake the habit once you’ve learned it. That’s for you to find out.”

Corenn didn’t like giving vague answers like that, but she couldn’t be more specific. It all depended on how Yan was going to face the test. The *dékades* to come would be crucial.

Their conversation carried on in this way, Corenn patiently and benevolently answering the young man’s questions. Yan drank her words in, trusting her completely. Corenn saw his faith in her, which made it that much harder for her to lie to him...

Yan would never pass the test. At least not in the way he imagined.

The important thing wasn’t to make the coin fall... but to try as long as possible.

If, after a few *dékades*, Yan was still just as motivated, Corenn would teach him how to use his Will. If he gave up, she would assume he didn’t have the power. He could only blame any failure on himself.

The magician had lied to him. *Everyone* had the ability. Everyone was a *potential* magician. But only patient and determined individuals could understand, develop, and master the ability. The test was merely a battle against one’s own nonchalance.

Even so, it wasn’t that simple. Everyone knew how to draw, shape clay, or hum, but only a few would become great painters, sculptors, or musicians. The same went for Will. Everyone had the power, several individuals had the necessary patience to learn it, but only a few elite were truly artists.

The reason Corenn offered to teach Yan was because he had already proved his art by saving Léti from a fatal fall.

With all her heart, she hoped he would have the patience.



They stopped their conversation at the first sound of footsteps on the staircase. It was odd for Léti's fighting lesson to be over already. No one said a word. Something must have happened.

Corenn rushed toward them, faster than she would have wanted to let her friends see. Her gaze immediately fell to the reddened cloth that her niece was pressing to her right hand. And then she did what no one there had seen her do yet. She grew furious. "There you have it! This was bound to happen! I hope you're happy!"

She put almost all the blame on Grigán. The touchy warrior fled her stare without responding. He understood her reaction, but it was the first time they had fought. He, who did his best to be indifferent, had been wounded to his very core.

"It's fine. No big deal," Léti said, nonchalantly.

Corenn's anger fell away as soon as she spoke. She had reacted as if Léti were nothing more than a child, unjustly wounded, a little girl she needed to protect and comfort. Her niece's controlled, mature attitude briefly set her off balance.

"At least, I hope it taught you a lesson," she commented, anxiously waiting for their response.

Neither Léti nor Grigán spoke. Rey timidly came to the rescue.

"You know, Corenn, it was just an accident. If Léti can learn how to defend herself, that should sooner reassure you..."

"An accident! And if the next time she loses an eye, what will we call that? A misfortune?"

Léti could no longer hide her irritation.

"And if the Züu stick a dagger in my stomach without me having the ability to defend myself? A regrettable tragedy?"

Corenn gaped at Léti. That was a low blow.

"I've had enough of depending on others," Léti continued, a little calmer. "I want to have a chance at survival, even when there's no one there to protect me. If we're attacked again, I want to be able to help Grigán, Rey, and all the others who fight for me. I'll learn by experience if I have to."

Corenn searched the warrior's eyes to read his opinion. She didn't know what to do anymore.

"She gave me the same lecture outside," he mumbled.

The Mother paced about to give herself some time to think. At the Council of the Matriarchy, she made decisions that affected entire communities, but she couldn't even reason with her own niece. The irony!

"All right. So you've already decided that you will fight, no matter what; no matter what we think?"

"Yes."

"Evidently. I suppose in that case, the best course of action would be for Grigán to give you some advice. That is, if he agrees, naturally."

"With pleasure," the warrior announced, happy to get himself out of trouble so easily.

"Nevertheless, I would like you to do something for me, Léti. Don't mix yourself up in any real combat until Grigán judges you're ready."

The young woman pretended to think about it, but accepted the condition to make her aunt happy and end this difficult conversation. For once, she had won the match and would leave the discussion a victor.

She didn't see the knowing smile exchanged between Grigán and Corenn.

One of Raji's suppliers paid him a visit just before nightfall, leading three packhorses loaded with fabric from Phar. Raji hurriedly stashed away this potential fortune maker in the secrecy of his warehouse, hoping with all his heart that his guests would be discreet.

He hadn't accounted for Grigán's almost morbid mistrust of anyone new. The warrior walked up and stood in front of the new arrival, his most fierce look fixed squarely on his face. The warning was clear. The merchant from the Baronies didn't comment and hastened to leave the small farmhouse. Whatever these hideaways had done, he didn't want to know. He was certain, though, that he didn't want them to cause him any trouble.

"It's already rude enough of you to force me to house you, but to kill my business too..." Raji said, not speaking to anyone but himself. Grigán didn't raise any objections to the remark. This whiny, corrupt smuggler had no sympathy from him. When he thought about it, an image of Rey flashing in his mind, all Loreliens were more or less unlikable people.

He locked the trapdoor that separated them from the stable as the heirs settled in for their second night in the warehouse. After the third, they would go meet the Züu.

They ate their dinner outside, sitting in Raji's courtyard, despite his protests and stern refusal to join them. When they finished, they returned to

the shelter provided by the secret cellar.

Despite their fatigue, and their recent sleepless night, they all agreed it was much too early to go to sleep. Bowbaq was especially restless as he had spent his whole day doing just that. In the cellar he announced to the heirs that he had perfectly recovered, even though he periodically winced in pain while he spoke.

They all wanted to converse. Each one of them had some story to tell or wanted to get the opinion of the others. There was much to discuss: the coming encounter with the Züu, their uncertain future, the identity of their enemy. But above all else, the mystery of the island loomed large in their minds.

For the first time since they had seen the other world, they were all gathered together under the right circumstances to share their impressions. No need to flee, no one trying to spy on them. The place was quiet, and their minds attentive.

Without any discussion, they gathered around Corenn. Grigán, the last to arrive, finished the circle.

Rey joked, "I guess no one was hoping to play a game of lucky stars? It's a shame, really, the number of players is ideal."

"I don't really like dice games," the warrior responded.

"You shouldn't say so, even if it's true," Bowbaq interrupted. "It's bad luck to insult destiny's fingers."

"What does it matter, really, given the situation we're in..."

An uncomfortable silence followed Rey's pessimistic reply. Léti took advantage of it and brought up a subject that was on her mind. "Bowbaq knows of a legend that could be about the other world."

Everyone's eyes turned toward the giant, which only made him sheepish. He tried to explain, mumbling, "I don't remember it so well anymore; I had just reached my tenth year. A Maz had been living with our clan. He knew many stories, and this one was only one among many. But last night, it came back to me, and the resemblance to what we saw is striking."

"Do you remember enough to tell us the story?" Corenn asked.

"Uh, well... it was about an old warrior lost in the mountains of the Curtain. He had been wandering there for several dékades until he stumbled onto a valley that was completely surrounded by massive mountains. But this country was rich in sugary fruits, and abundant in game and clean



water. The first hospitable land he had come across in a long time. He decided to stay there.

“People were already living there, all of them very young. They welcomed him with open arms. The warrior lived with them for several dékades, happy to find rest in this peaceful place.

“But it was only a façade. These new friends of his were not humans. They were nothing more than demons!”

“I bet they were,” Rey cut him off. “Demons. I should have thought of it first. With big red horns and forked feet. Obvious, really.”

“Let him finish his story,” Corenn asked nicely. “We will talk about it after.”

“It’s almost over. The demons made the warrior talk, tell stories, tell more stories, and they eventually took all his memories. Every name that he recited gave them more influence over the world. The demons could not leave the valley, but everything they learned about the outside world, they could use to do evil.”

“How did the warrior manage to leave?” Yan asked.

“He never did. When he finally understood the situation, he bought his freedom by promising the demons that he would send them other people who had many more memories for them to take. But he didn’t keep his promise, and the demons weighed him down with pain and suffering until he died. He didn’t know that they could torture him more easily than any human.”

“An odd story to tell kids,” Rey commented. “He was a Maz of what cult? Of the Valipondes?”

“A Maz of Yoos. A kind god. But this story was not part of the cult’s; he only told it because all children like to feel fear.”

“I hope that you aren’t using this idea as a parent, when it’s clearly incongruous with your other morals. Imagine our Bowbaq bursting into the bedroom of... Iulane and Prad, right? Disguised as a terrible bear, just to ‘please the children with fear.’ Guaranteed to work,” Rey finished.

This joke finally made everyone laugh, particularly Léti. Yet again, she could feel herself falling for the actor’s good humor and charm.

“It’s the first time I have ever heard this legend,” Corenn declared, when they had all finally calmed down. “It’s not a very inviting story, compared to the others the heirs have collected over the years. But there are some similarities.”

“Like?”

“The Curtain. Several of our stories mention a marvelous valley, situated somewhere in its highest summits.”

“Valleys are necessarily surrounded by mountains,” Rey objected. “And it’s easy for poets to situate these legendary places in the Curtain. The majority of its heights are inaccessible. Not to mention very few people have explored its eastern side. No one could fact-check these stories!”

Yan remembered a small detail during this exchange and then convinced himself of its certitude: the location of the valley—if it were indeed of this world.

“Behind the portal, it was dawn,” he announced.

Corenn gave him an encouraging smile. Grigán had a satisfied grin. The others stared at him with eager eyes.

“The morning sun was shining on the mountains,” he repeated. “While on Ji, it was still nighttime. The sun was rising on the mountains from the east! The valley must be somewhere in the Curtain!”

The remark had its desired effect. They all, except for Corenn and Grigán, who had known this fact for a long time, stared at each other, stunned.

“Somewhere in the Curtain,” Rey said. “That’s still a pretty large chunk of land to explore, about three times as big as the Matriarchy. And not so easy to get to.”

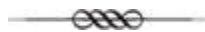
“Unfortunately, yes. It’s useless to hope to find the valley at random. No heir has even tried, for that matter. Especially because it could just be a false trail, if the valley exists in another world.”

“So we haven’t really gotten anywhere, have we?”

“But Aunt Corenn... what do you think of Bowbaq’s story? Is it possible that behind the portal is a land of demons?”

Corenn looked for a reassuring response that wouldn’t be a lie. In vain, she resigned herself. “Anything is possible, Léti. Anything.”

The Mother feared that in looking for the truth about Ji, they would run into a danger that was much worse than the threat of the Züu. But she kept this reflection to herself.



Yan went to bed with the image of a coin in his eyes and stories blending in his head. One and then the other kept him from dozing off. Corenn and Grigán had told them a few of the legends describing gateways similar to the one on Ji. They all spoke of magnificent landscapes, or villages where only children lived. The majority of them smacked of pure invention, more poetic story than religious account or traveler's tale. However, a few of them deserved attention. Yan mentally revisited them, trying to pierce through to their secret.

The Great Sohonne Arch—a structure in Arkary similar to the Ji gateway—would someday provide passage for an army of perfect warriors, who would save the children of the White Country from some obscure threat. Even Bowbaq, a native of Arkary, didn't know this legend.

Another legend, undoubtedly of religious origin, confirmed the existence of a marvelous land where the wise ones' spirits would reincarnate as children. It was the most optimistic one, but not the strangest.

Rey remembered a legend that said the most deserving followers of a cult would be reborn near their Goddess in order to help her with her Great Work. As he was asked for more details, Rey named the paradise and the Goddess: Lus'an and Zuia. No one appreciated the joke. Especially since the mysterious valley might have truly been the red killers' Lus'an.

Another legend mentioned gateways capable of conquering time. Anyone who went through them would gain immortality, but would call the gods' wrath upon him and would suffer their curse for eternity.

Yet another spoke of a magnificent kingdom whose entryway was guarded by children. Only those who triumphed over these strange guardians could enter. The legend didn't explain how they were dangerous...

There were others, and others still...

Their commonalities—children, gateways, a valley, gods, misfortune—were troubling. But of the multitudinous tales passed along in each country, there were inevitably some that dealt with all of these subjects.

The first narrators of these stories might have known some part of the truth. They might have imagined the rest. How was it possible to tease one from the other? Which parts were true? Which fake? And what if the truth were altogether different?

*What was on the other side of the gateway?* Yan wondered.



The morning came, and Yan felt like he hadn't really rested at all. His thoughts followed him into his deepest dreams. Memories of the gateway mixed with stories of the land of demons, and visions of demonic children spinning coins in the air.

He was disappointed that Léti wasn't near him. The night before, the young woman had fallen asleep at his side, and he was hoping she would still be there upon waking. Even the smallest signs of affection from Léti were precious to him. They had fought side by side. He had let the day of the Promise pass. Rey was unconsciously turning out to be a fierce rival, but Yan wasn't going to let her go.

Everyone was already awake. The cellar was empty, except for him. He quickly dressed, wondering what day it was, and then hurried to join his companions outside.

A late morning sun shone on the heirs, who were gathered in front of the stable for Léti's second lesson. They all had the bright look of people who had been awake for some time.

The atmosphere was much more relaxed than on the day before. Even though she didn't approve, Corenn appeared to be enjoying the show. They waved to the newest arrival, and the lesson continued. Léti and Grigán were facing each other: the young woman armed with just a branch; Grigán only with his bare hands. The warrior was trying to touch Léti while avoiding the improvised sword, as Bowbaq, Corenn, and Rey cheered or booed.

"Did I miss much?" Yan asked, rubbing his eyes.

"They just got started," Corenn answered, smiling. "They argued for a long time to decide whether Léti would use a real blade. As you can see, Grigán had the last word, but the discussion was heated."

"I really regret having missed it. I didn't sleep very well. I saw spinning coins all night."

"That's normal," the magician whispered to him in a lowered voice. "Imagine that you're trying to wake up a sleeping muscle. For a while, you might have mind 'cramps.' But that's a good sign."

Yan agreed, trying to feel happy at the news. All of this was well and good, but for the time being, he had a terrible headache.

He tasted the dried biscuits that Rey had haggled out of Raji, and then laid out comfortably on a pile of straw to watch the show.

Léti concentrated intently. This exercise was the opposite of yesterday's: Grigán attacked, and she defended. The big man coming at her reminded her of her fight with the three brigands. Those men would have killed her for sport. It would be different next time, she promised herself.

Grigán didn't waste any movements. He was content to calmly circle the young woman, faking an attack from time to time.

He tried four separate times to catch Léti off balance, moving toward her left and jumping to attack her right side. She kept him at a distance with her branch. The warrior hinted at an identical attack, but came back to her left side, a double feint. He had her completely turned around and gave her a small tap on her shoulder.

"One—all," he announced with satisfaction.

"Boo! Grigán, you're a cheater!" Rey chanted, with plenty of bias.

Bowbaq added, "Give her a longer branch!"

Grigán addressed Léti, "You didn't do half-bad."

Léti smiled in return for the compliment, stepped back, and spun her imaginary sword, her friends cheering her on.

"All right, master Grigán," she said, imitating Corenn's intonation. "What am I going to learn today?"

The warrior quickly improvised something. He still wasn't used to giving an explanation for these demonstrations.

"A simple sidestep can mean victory," he announced, somewhat proud of himself. "Acrobatic movements are tiring and dangerous, and can make you impulsive. Always try to stay calm. Be a master of yourself."

"Acrobatics can surprise your opponent," Rey objected.

"When she can keep her balance, she will be free to do some somersaults."

Yan threw out a mischievous idea: "I'd love to see how you handle yourself, Rey."

Rey winked at his friend and examined Grigán. The warrior invited Rey to join him, sporting a radiant smile, which his scar transformed into a sadistic grin. But maybe that wasn't the only reason...

"And me?" Léti asked as she handed over her branch to Rey.

"Watch what he does." Grigán grabbed a stick. "Take note of the errors you should avoid."

"Ha ha! Very funny. If you make me angry, I will stick you through with all the branches in the forest."

The two men took position, as serious as their fake swords would let them. Rey launched a few attacks that Grigán easily cast off. The actor then tried a more complicated sequence, but his style of attack was really only effective with the heavy swords of Lorelien nobility, not so much with a branch.

“Grigán, why don’t you attack him?” Léti asked, very seriously. Her eyes were glued to the two men’s every movement.

“That’s what I am doing,” responded the warrior, who was only linking together a series of evasions and parries.

Rey understood that he wouldn’t get the upper hand this way. So he tried various acrobatics, hoping to both demonstrate the value of his comments and to transform his defeat into a comical success. He pivoted in a circle, rolled to the ground, fought from his knees and even from his stomach, flaunting expressions that were more and more dramatic. They all laughed plenty, and Grigán, who could have already won twenty times over, joined the game by prolonging the battle. Rey finally ended it by falling on his own branch and, with a bloodcurdling scream, fell outstretched in front of Léti.

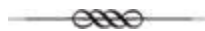
He stayed laid out as the laughing continued until the young woman came over to help him up.

“Avenge me...” he mumbled, handing her the branch.

The scene was amusing, but Rey’s face was terrifying. The actor played it all too well.

Léti resumed her training with a smile on her face, but she was internally shaken. Rey had just reminded her that any one of the heirs could die soon.

She assiduously completed all of Grigán’s exercises.



The rest of the day went by at a leisurely pace. They had been awaiting the Day of the Owl, the seventh day of the current décade, to meet with the Züu. They had only one more day to wait, but they were impatient for the day when they would learn their fates.

Everyone killed time in his or her own way. Yan slipped off alone into the forest for a long while, only to come back complaining about a severe migraine. He missed Bowbaq’s demonstration of his erjak powers on Raji’s

donkey. Once past the inevitable period of anxiety, the animal had gotten used to the intrusion into his mind and agreed to do a few tricks in exchange for a considerable amount of sweets.

Rey refused to believe that the head nods and hoof stamps were under the giant's command. Granted, Bowbaq was an uncanny trainer, but he was also an incorrigible prankster. The actor swore that he wouldn't let himself be fooled.

Grigán, who undertook anything he did with great intention, thought about what else he could teach Léti. He didn't want to improvise his lessons, but plan them so that each one addressed a different and more difficult concept than the one before it.

The warrior spoke five languages fluently, but neither read nor wrote a word of any of them. He did all of his planning mentally, while running his hands through his hair. Periodically, he would leave the stable to confirm a movement with his curved blade, oblivious to his friends' curious looks, and then return to his task. Even though he would never admit it, he was very pleased to teach the art of combat, a field in which he excelled, compared to the rest of the group.

Corenn added a few pages to the journal she had been keeping since leaving the Matriarchy. It was difficult for her to forget her responsibilities to the Permanent Council, even though it had been two *dékades* since she had even seen Kaul. The Mother made note of their every movement. If things went for the worse, the journal might help explain certain things to those who found it. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be able to help too much: Her promise didn't allow her to make the slightest mention of Ji and the miracle they saw there. Her writings were therefore intentionally vague, or even contradictory.

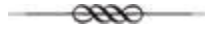
Rey finally managed to get a few of the heirs to play a game of Ithare dice. Bowbaq, Léti, and Yan soon found themselves sitting together, rolling little engraved dice, and listening to advice from the actor, a master of the subject. He decided on the *two brothers* variation, among the easiest to learn, but Bowbaq still had trouble telling the difference between the elemental shapes, and Yan's mind was elsewhere. They both gave up quickly enough. Léti then admitted that she had never really liked dice that much.

The actor risked challenging Raji to a game. Since dawn, the smuggler had blatantly ignored his guests, quietly going about his business instead.

The little man had a passion for dice, and to Rey's surprise, he accepted.

After a few rounds with no stakes, the two men were soon betting a few tices, which quickly escalated to several terces. Rey had already pocketed the price of his stay at the farm before Raji finally decided to quit.

Night finally came, and for the third time the heirs went to sleep in the cellar, wondering what the next day would bring.



Bellec couldn't believe his eyes when Raji popped into his cellar with not just two nuisances, like last time, but with six *guests*. Worse, two of them were women. The innkeeper thought that women were incapable of keeping a secret. Which was to say that it was practically the end of his lucrative smuggling operation.

Raji shook his head helplessly when Bellec looked his way. It wasn't his choice to be there. He wouldn't have even come to Lorelia today if he didn't need to keep an eye on his uninvited houseguests.

Grigán squashed the smuggler's complaints and signaled to the small group to leave the inn. He was already in a sour-enough mood about their plans for the day, and wasn't about to subject himself to another litany of unjustified complaints from the Lorelien.

Only he and Corenn were going to meet with the Züu at the Small Palace. Rey had proven to be pretty amenable to the idea of staying outside; the danger that he would be recognized by a Lorelien citizen was too large. He had insisted that he would accompany them to the front door, though, and the warrior had gracefully conceded. Some reinforcements for the exit strategy would prove useful.

After letting Rey join them, Léti had immediately invited herself to join what now had become a real expedition. Corenn had exhausted her arguments to convince her to give up the idea, and Grigán had finally abandoned any hope of getting a word in. He threw his hands up in the air, saying that if there were any other suicidal candidates, they just had to say so.

Yan looked at Léti longingly, but he couldn't leave Bowbaq alone. The giant was feeling much better and could certainly do without someone watching over him, but Kaulien courtesy wouldn't allow it. Anyhow, Yan



had something to keep himself busy. Corenn understood without mentioning it that he would spend the whole day working with his Will.

On this trip, it was Grigán who led the group to the Small Palace—and he did so at a brisk pace. It was out of the question to take a leisurely walk through the city. The warrior was anxious, and as always in these situations, his taciturn side took over, and he fell into a persistent dark mood.

They soon found themselves near the building. Riders' Square, so spacious two days before, seemed small now that it was occupied by market stands of all sorts and sizes. Rey adjusted his novice's robe to better cover his Zü tunic as they waded through the crowd.

They parted ways when they were a few blocks from the building. If the members of the group were all seen together, Rey's reinforcement would no longer be a surprise for any eventual attackers. Corenn and Grigán went inside the imposing building alone, leaving Léti and the actor in the middle of the market.

The young woman couldn't help but think that she might be seeing her aunt for the last time. The heirs had been through so much together these last few days, and each separation was more excruciating than the last. Especially this time, when the danger was so real...

"It's so massive!" she said randomly, trying to hide her worries.

"You've never been to Lorelia?"

"Only to the harbor. We always took the boat from Bénélia to here, and then we went straight to Berce. It's the first time I've been inside the city's walls."

"And inversely, it's the first time the Loreliens have seen you. They're the luckier ones."

Léti smiled at this and scrutinized her surroundings while Rey watched the entrance to the Small Palace. Many of the goods for sale at the market were completely unfamiliar to her. But the merchants and the shoppers were even stranger...

In Riders' Square there was at least one person from all of the world's great peoples. Loreliens, of course, but also, Goranese, Ithare, citizens of all five provinces of Romine, Arque, Kaulien, Jez, Guori, Yérim, Junine, not to mention members of the eleven main tribes of the Lower Kingdoms. Eastians were afoot, as well as people from the other side of the Curtain, of whom little was known other than that they often warred with the Goranese.

Not counting the Züu either.

Léti suddenly became aware of how vast and rich the world was, and thought that a single life would not be enough to discover the half of it. These last two dékades, even though they were spent almost entirely on horseback, had only allowed her to see the extreme south of Lorelia—the closest kingdom to Kaul.

Now she understood what Yan was trying to explain to her before. The young man desired to meet people who were different... visit strange places, experience rare things. Previously, she had found this desire a bit bizarre, even questionable, but now she felt the same.

Yan solely wanted to live.

*But he doesn't love me*, she had to remind herself, which saddened her further. He had not asked for her Promise, and he wasn't doing anything to stop Rey from charming her. Worse, it seemed he preferred solitude over her company, now that he was spending so much time in the forest, alone.

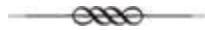
She closed her mind to this new wave of pain. *The past is dead; the future is dying*, as the proverb goes. Only the present is worth your time.

"Do you see something?" she asked Rey.

"Nothing. It's been long enough to assume they got in. That's a good sign, right? Maybe they are sharing a drink with the Züu, to celebrate the new peace."

Léti smiled at his joke, even though she actually felt like crying.

*Why wasn't she with Yan at her house in Eza, like before?*



The jeleni stationed at the hallway's entrance stared Grigán down for a long time. The guard was wondering whether he should let in this Ramgrith, armed from head to toe, and whose fierce stare met his own. The warrior made no effort to appeal to the Lorelien guard. He simply waited for him to get out of the way. Under other circumstances, Grigán would have simply ignored the guard and walked right past him.

The jeleni let out his dog's chain a little; the canine only needed a few more feet of slack to jump at the warrior's throat. Grigán didn't move, even when the dog was close enough to leave traces of its panting breath on his black leather.

Corenn pulled Grigán back and then went forward. This way of doing things wouldn't do them any good. She held out a golden terce to the guard,

who immediately called his dog to heel. The dog obeyed, but growled at the two visitors as the guard ushered them by.

Corenn entered the narrow hallway with Grigán following closely behind. They squeezed their way through the other elite soldiers and their ravenous dogs. Being surrounded like this set Grigán's nerves on edge. He was relieved when they reached the more spacious entry hall, even if it was just as well guarded as the front door. At least in this room there was no lack of space for him to fight back, if it ever came to that.

"Try not to be so tense," Corenn whispered to him. "You look like you're in the mood to start a fight. The guards can tell, and so can I."

"There are some Züu within thirty feet of here," he shot back. "I won't rest easy until we've put at least thirty *leagues* between us and them."

Corenn shook her head and led them toward the scribe at the registry desk, which also acted as the tollbooth. There was a short line of people waiting under the watchful eyes of three jelenis, who relieved all visitors of their weapons. Corenn and Grigán didn't recognize any Züu among the traders waiting, but the red killers could very well have a civilian employee in charge of such deals.

Corenn wasn't carrying a weapon, and the guards didn't linger on her for long. For Grigán it was a different story. The warrior handed over a dagger, a smaller dirk, and from a much larger sheath drew a Goranese broadsword, which he had brought in place of his usual curved blade. The jelenis suspected him of carrying another weapon concealed in his robes, and Grigán had to endure a thorough inspection in order to convince them otherwise. The guards finished their search with a sigh and a long look at the warrior, disappointed that they hadn't been able to catch the Ramgrith red-handed.

The scribe collecting fees was in no hurry, and they still had to wait a long time before reaching his desk.

"Names?" he asked, listlessly.

"Adnéra from Mestèbe, and Bahlin from Phar," Corenn answered, speaking the lies she had prepared.

The scribe slowly copied the information down in an enormous record book, having Corenn spell out each letter of every name, including the names of the two universally recognized towns.

"Is it the first time you've come to the Small Palace?" he asked, after consulting a thirty-page list.

“Yes.”

“What is the purpose of your visit?”

“We wish to meet with the priests from Zuia, so we can make an offering to the cult,” Corenn announced calmly.

The scribe and the two jelenis on either side of him stared at her in surprise. Such candor was rare. Most traders claimed they came out of pure curiosity. The scribe suddenly decided not to keep these crazy, or complacent, strangers any longer. He had no desire to meddle in the red assassins’ affairs, or worse, admit to himself that he was, by circumstance, the assassins’ secretary.

“Well,” he began, with newfound efficiency, “the rules for inside the palace are simple, but I request that you follow them scrupulously. One: Shouting is not allowed. All deals must take place in a calm and collected manner suitable to these honorable grounds. Two: Any scene of violence, whether verbal or physical, will result in expulsion from the palace. Last, and most important: The mere allusion to an agreement capable of bringing any harm to the Crown, its interests, or the citizens of its kingdom, is punishable by hanging. Do you have any questions?”

“None.”

“Well. May Dona smile upon you,” he said, dismissing them with the merchants’ sacred saying, all too happy to be rid of the bothersome visitors.

“Aren’t you going to ask us to pay?” asked Corenn, most candidly.

The scribe blushed at his oversight, mumbling a string of excuses while receiving an onslaught of mockery from the jelenis and the visitors waiting behind Grigán. Forty gold terces were exchanged, and the Lorelien wrote out a receipt as quickly as possible.

“I would have preferred a more discreet entry,” the warrior muttered as they made their way to the covered courtyard.

“You’re never satisfied anyway,” Corenn teased, still smiling about the scribe.

They walked through an ornate arch and found themselves in the Small Palace’s gardens.

Although their minds were occupied with other things, the arch reminded them of another one, a much more mysterious one, on the island of Ji.



Yan closed his eyes, cleared his mind, and focused on the coin. He didn't know what else to do to pass the test. Up until now, he hadn't achieved anything. He pictured the object as clearly as if he were staring at it. He knew its every detail. Every nick, imperfection, variation in color: every point of its surface. He would still remember it even in his dying days. He was spending more time with the coin than any of his friends, he thought, as he tried to regain his concentration. He was beginning to hate the shiny disk.

He imagined it standing up perfectly straight along its edge, a shameful monument, standing tall, symbolizing his numerous failures. He concentrated all his thoughts, all his Will, all of the force in his mind, on a single thing: the image of the coin falling on its side.

After an indeterminate period of time, he opened his eyes again. He was weak as he lifted his tired eyes, feeling exhausted as if waking from a night of bad dreams.

The coin still stood tall, taunting him.

Yan extended his finger and gently tapped the upper edge, finally causing it to topple over as he had imagined it doing countless times.

It only needed such a small amount of force. *Why couldn't he do it?*



“Let’s not stay so close,” Rey whispered to Léti. “We might get ourselves noticed, standing in front of the palace for too long.” Léti observed the Zü tunic the actor was wearing, wondering how they could possibly make themselves any more noticeable. While no one dared to come near them, each time a flash of red fabric appeared, they imagined themselves the target of every glance.

“I would have liked to get my hands on an Ithare mask,” Rey said regretfully as they wandered between the display stands. “The hood can’t be doing that good of a job hiding my face. I’ll end up getting recognized.”

“You sound like Grigán!” Léti said, laughing. “Don’t worry, it looks as if everyone’s trying to avoid looking at you straight on.”

“Even the women? I’d better take this thing off right away!” he joked.

They wandered about aimlessly, though their eyes never wandered from the front door of the palace. Léti thought to herself that under different circumstances, she would have enjoyed letting Rey show her the city, its wealth, its character, and the characters in it. One such character was a man who went from stall to stall, escorted by three burly lads carrying a dozen or more purses at his belt.

“Is he a collector?”

“Surely not! The collectors would never risk it in town with such a small escort. He’s a currency trader. He buys or sells terces for other currencies.”

“That’s a job?” she replied, surprised.

“Of course. And quite lucrative even, albeit risky. The currency traders have everyone on their backs: the collectors, the Guild, the merchants, and even their own clients.”

“I don’t understand how someone can make a living that way.”

“Me neither. I tried for a while, but I had to give up,” the actor admitted with a smile. “The Goranese crowns, the Ithare disks, the moons from the Baronies, the Kaulien queen moons, the beads from the Lower Kingdoms, the Rominian monarchs, plus each of their specific denominations; I mixed them all up. One time I was even offered Wallate and Thalitte coins I’d never seen before! I had to get out before going completely bankrupt.”

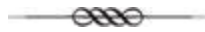
“You’ve had an odd career path,” Léti said, with gentle mockery. “Smuggler, currency trader, actor...”

“Waiter, knife thrower, public writer, and even a sailor for a short décade,” Rey finished. “Sailing was the worst. Eight days on a boat without a single woman aboard!”

Léti punched him on the shoulder out of mock disapproval, but she was full of gratitude for the actor. When she was with him, he always managed to put her anxieties to rest. Today was no different. Around him, she felt good. He was ten years her senior and carried himself with a sense of assuredness, which made her feel reassured. She had found him charming from the very moment they had met. Perhaps, she thought, he could manage to make her forget Yan...

Rey didn't leave her any more time for reflection and pulled her along with a mischievous grin.

“Come on. I'm going to show you something you can only find here in Lorelia. The only line of work I was actually good at for a while.”



Grigán and Corenn weren't the first to arrive in the Small Palace's gardens. Twenty or so merchants were already walking around its paths, and there were at least that many behind the séda hedges that traversed the courtyard. As predicted, jelenis patrolled under the portico that circled the place, while archers on the balconies were on the lookout for the smallest sign of a scuffle. These precautions, which should have reassured the warrior, made him feel uneasy. In his preparations, he had neglected a deadly possibility: What if the Züu had infiltrated the Lorelien guard? Or bribed them?

“Would you mind waiting for me here, Corenn? I won't be gone long. Stay hidden in the shadows beneath the portico.”

The Mother nodded her head while Grigán headed for the center of the garden in slow strides, keeping an eye out for any signs of aggression. The people he passed stopped their conversations until he was out of earshot. Doubtless, they took him to be one of the Crown's many spies who patrolled the market.

The gardens of the Small Palace, where you could sell just about anything, had become the obligatory route for all illegal affairs over the years. All the products and services that were forbidden in the rest of the kingdom were available here with complete impunity. You could hire a company of mercenaries from the Guild, or some Züu. Slaves, drugs,

artwork stolen from the various cults were all sold in the gardens between the hedges and under the shade. People made secret alliances, conspired, bargained on neutral ground. It was an inexhaustible source of revenues for the Crown, and a place where Lorelien spies roamed, trying to gain any information they could about her subjects.

After some time Grigán figured he had distanced himself too much from Corenn and returned to her. He supposed that if no arrow had nailed him to the ground, there wasn't a Zü hidden among the archers. This reassured the warrior, but only slightly.

"The reigning logic in this place is really disturbing," the Mother declared, when he had reappeared at her side. "I randomly happened upon some conversations. That man, over there, is looking to sell a cargo of precious salt that he got from pirating. The little one, next to him, is the previous owner of this treasure; he is trying to buy back the cargo and the boat that the first one stole! They are in the middle of agreeing on a price. Don't you find that extraordinary?"

"What would truly be extraordinary would be if the Züu even agree to listen to us," the warrior responded with a frown. "Let's finish this as quickly as possible, Lady Corenn, I beg you."

They took the footpath and walked past small groups in the middle of heated negotiations. About half of the merchants were Lorelien; the rest were from Goran, Romine, or Jezeba.

A parade of offers were made to them: a relic from Yoos, eggs from a dai snake, a map of the Kolimine Palace (which of course marked the treasure room), and a big man carrying Soltan's emblems offered them a cask of human blood. Corenn tried not to think about its source or its use. Finally, a man from Yérim, with a baleful look, insisted on selling Grigán a nubile slave, whom he made a point of describing as exceptionally obedient. The warrior shot him a dark look, but it was Corenn who chased away this final unwelcome offering with her most severe tone.

They came to a stop at a detour in the trail. They had just found two of Zuia's messengers. The Züu.

The assassins were a few paces back in the hedge, seated on a marble bench, avoided by the majority of merchants. They sat there, waiting.

They stood as the heirs approached. They recognized Corenn and Grigán.





Yan took a break from his attempts to overcome the “magician’s test” to spend some time talking to Bowbaq. Per the young man’s request, the giant had talked about the heirs’ former reunions, tying in several anecdotes about their friends, especially about Léti’s younger years.

They enjoyed a moment of laughter, in large part thanks to the story about Rey starting the fire fifteen years earlier. Yan pointed out that it was certainly the only time the actor got himself caught.

But the break was over now, and Bowbaq was assigning himself the chore of brushing the horses and giving them some exercise. He could no longer bear lying down with nothing to do, and keeping his hands busy would also keep him from thinking too much. He’d had more than his fair share of agonizing thoughts.

With Bowbaq busying himself with the horses, Yan got back to work with the coin. He walked into the forest, stretched out flat on his stomach, and stared at the coin. Weary from the start, he started counting how many decadays he’d already spent on the exercise, but the increasing sum scared him. He interrupted his calculation and thought to himself that he had to be more serious, more focused, more determined.

He threw himself into the exercise for two whole decadays, trying not to *drive* his Will anymore, but to *unleash* it instead like Corenn suggested. This suggestion, however, was merely an abstract idea beyond Yan’s grasp, and he didn’t have the slightest clue how to proceed. He felt like a bird being asked to fly before his wings could support him. He was powerless, and the coin remained unmoved.

Despite his failures, he managed to exhaust himself in trying. And he came out of each unsuccessful attempt with his mind empty and his body weak. His efforts were real, and he felt that he must have been producing something, even if it was insufficient.

He laid down closer to the coin standing on its edge. Fruitless. Even though he hadn’t explicitly asked Corenn, Yan had already figured out that the distance between the “magician” and the target was unimportant, so long as the latter was visible.

He couldn’t stand the coin anymore. The surface worn halfway down, two nicks on the edge; its flaws annoyed him. He had never hated an object so much, he thought. And this feeling certainly wouldn’t help him succeed...

For a moment he pondered changing coins, but dropped the idea, realizing he would inevitably end up *hating* the next coin just as much. It was impossible for him to continue with any Kaulien coins. He had pinpointed a problem—he needed an object other than a coin. He couldn't concentrate until he resolved it.

A sudden impulse reminded him of the little blue queen moon that hung around his neck. A gift from Léti. This was an object he would never grow tired of staring at. He carefully untied the shell from its leather lace and set it upright in the coin's place. The exercise would only be more difficult, the wider base rendering the object more stable. But it would also be more tolerable...

He regained his focus, this time thinking about Léti...



The young woman followed Rey through the labyrinth of stalls, curious to find out where he was taking her. The actor was smiling like a child, and he took Léti by the hand so that he could guide her more easily. Blushing, she let him. They left the Riders' Square to plunge into a street that was less spacious but just as busy. Rey crossed this new street before heading down a side street congested with carts.

"Shouldn't we stay close to the palace?" Léti timidly tried to remind him.

"We aren't going too far away. It's up here on the left."

They arrived shortly thereafter and found a very lively spot. It was a full avenue, a street where people mingled rather than simply passed through. Plenty of people lingered at one of the many patios, where there were little tables set up right in the middle of the avenue.

"The Courtyard of Games," the actor announced with pride. "Games of Ithare dice, of course, but also tarot, the strategist, spinning tops, the columns of Corosta, catch, jerpe, and all sorts of other gambling games. Here, fortunes are made or lost day and night, without pause. All of this under the collectors' watchful eyes, of course. I made a living off dice for a whole year, once."

They approached the little tables where players and observers gathered. Piles of money changed hands, with cries of joy or defeat. Léti observed a group playing guéjac, but quickly got confused by the rules—

her poor understanding of the Lorelien tongue not helping. She moved over to watch a fight between two bellican spiders, which were fighting in front of a crowd that had placed large bets, but she walked away in disgust when the victorious insect devoured the head of its victim.

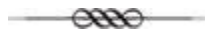
Throughout the whole street, people were talking, playing, laughing, drinking, and shouting—the air was alive with noise. Sounds of vigolas, bent flutes, and stringed moons drifted through the air, mixing with the cacophony, giving the whole scene an impression of a continuous party. A fascinating place, Léti thought. *Yan would have loved to see this*, she daydreamed before she remembered Rey.

“Why did you stop playing? A losing streak?”

“On the contrary, the collectors only bother with the winners, and they started to stick too closely on my heels. I hated it. One day, a ‘friend’ introduced me to a guy who was looking for an experienced actor for his troupe. I lied to him, and ever since I’ve been an actor.” He finished with a wink.

Léti let herself succumb to the actor’s charms. He was so sure of himself, and she was so lost...

She took his hand to lead them back to the Small Palace. Rey let her.



Corenn, Grigán, and the two Züu stood face-to-face for a long time; a little too long, thought the guards responsible for monitoring the red killers. They both wondered if there would be a fight, and, if so, when it would break out.

“You’ve come from Ji, haven’t you?” the smaller Zü asked coolly, while the other fixed them with a hateful stare.

“That’s exactly right,” Corenn answered after a pause.

There was no reason to lie. She was hoping that during the meeting they would lay all cards on the table. The heirs had a lot to win... or lose.

“Let’s sit down,” the Zü continued, in perfect Lorelien. “I’m sure you have a lot of things to ask us, don’t you? Standing tends to cause the Bondrian archers to lose their cool. They’re... afraid, you see, that we might breach the rules of this neutral ground.”

“That’s surprising,” jabbed Grigán, taking a seat next to Corenn.

He deliberately put himself between the Mother and the assassin priests, noting their every move with a watchful eye. The Züu wouldn’t kill

an heir today, or if they did, they were going to have to kill two.

"I'm happy to find an attentive ear," Corenn began. "I'll admit, I was afraid I'd meet someone more close-minded and not open to a discussion."

"I would be lying if I didn't acknowledge my surprise," the red killer responded in the same polite tone. "But I'm quite curious to hear you out... although I can already guess your requests."

Corenn drew in a deep breath, searching for courage. She had become a queen in the art of diplomacy on Kaul's Permanent Council, but never had she participated in a debate where the stakes were nothing less than six of her friend's lives, and where the odds of coming out on top were so slim. She thought through her "plan of attack" and started in on the offensive.

"How did you recognize us?" she asked, nonchalantly, as if it were of no consequence.

The Zü hesitated for a moment, undecided. His sidekick kept a close eye on the heirs in the same way that Grigán was on guard against the Züu. The fight between Corenn and the polite assassin was cordial, but no less deadly.

"Why would I answer?" he finally replied with a light smile on his lips.

Corenn swallowed her disappointment without showing it. She had lost the first battle. Her adversary was no novice; that much was clear now. She dropped the subject, as if it were hardly of any importance. The Züu documents they had found already proved that the signaling of victims was passed along in writing. The killers had an excellent system established.

"You're right," the Mother conceded, "you don't have to divulge your secrets. My apologies."

The Zü gave a subtle nod indicating that he accepted her apology. The conversation was now an open playing field. Corenn had just overtly ceded a victory to the Zü, which meant that he would be more inclined to cede in turn, but perhaps, inadvertently, on a more crucial point.

Diplomacy was a difficult art. Corenn felt that now more than ever. And its similarity with military strategy was obvious to someone familiar with both disciplines. The choice of words and arguments was the preparations for war. Intonation, facial expressions, and the rest were the battle. How you managed silences, interruptions, and all outside interferences was how you commanded. The two parties could win or lose

ground, get killed, call a cease-fire, launch counterattacks; everything was at stake.

For the moment, the Zü held a heavily defended, solid castle, and Corenn was attempting to lead an attack with a measly wooden sword. Her only chance was to get him to open the doors from the inside.

“The Goddess’s disciples are continually growing in number,” she pointed out casually, to introduce the subject. “Soon every capital will have a temple dedicated to Zuia. I mean one that’s out in the open. To keep the messengers underground, as current governments are doing, is definitely the worst solution for everyone.”

“I share your viewpoint,” responded the killer, plainly.

The door was still closed. Corenn set the bait. “Which has made it extremely difficult for us to meet,” she continued. “To the point that it was almost too late to explain ourselves to one another and settle this worn-out disagreement that has pitted us against each other.”

Grigán admired the way Corenn was handling herself. Certain subtleties of this invisible battle might have escaped him, but he appreciated the way she presented their fight to the death as an already forgotten quarrel.

Corenn’s trap for the Zü was a gamble, but one she made without flinching. Either the Zü would fall for it, in which case the rest would be easy, or he would see through it, which would force Corenn to reveal the weakness of her army.

The killer was smart, and he was not fooled.

“What worn-out disagreement?” he asked, dragging his words. “You have been judged by Züia. Her messengers deliver the sentence. What you call a ‘worn-out disagreement’ is nothing less than a divine command.”

Grigán held back from leaping at the killer, to punish his insolence with a blow to the head. To do so would be to sign his own death warrant, but it was hard to restrain himself. Corenn had asked him to not interrupt as much as possible, and now he understood why. One false step could tip the balance in the Züu’s favor. Even if the warrior didn’t agree with the idea behind this attempt, he was smart enough to leave Corenn every opportunity to bring it to fruition. He kept his anxiety at bay for now, even though things seemed to be off to a truly poor start.

Corenn had prepared herself for the first attempt’s failure, but it didn’t gall her any less. She had to attack from another angle.

The Mother leaned in toward the Zü, who did the same to hear her better. Grigán watched and felt his muscles tense up like a panther ready to pounce.

“We both know,” the Mother said with a complicit tone, “that the messengers are sometimes hired as vulgar hit men by those who care very little about Zuïa, her judgment, or justice in general.”

The fanatic didn’t respond, thereby acknowledging that he shared her opinion and inviting Corenn to continue. So far this was the best result she’d had.

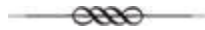
“It’s obvious that this is our case. The man who claims to speak on behalf of Zuïa and who sent the messengers after us has deceived you. He doesn’t believe in Zuïa.”

“He made an offering to the Judges of Lus’an,” the assassin shot back. “That’s enough to prove his faith.”

Corenn felt her heart leap. She had just wrested an important piece of information from him. A man. Their enemy was a *man*.

She let a long moment of silence drift by, fixing the Zü with a weighty stare. Then she launched her strongest attack.

“We would also like to make an offering to the cult.”



Yan scrutinized the little seashell with a bluish sheen. By replacing the hated coin with this beloved charm, he had resparked his interest in the exercise. He was proud of himself. Concentrating on the seashell made him think of Léti, and thinking of Léti encouraged him to concentrate. Bit by bit he attained a new spiritual level; it was as if his mind had been cloistered in a narrow, dark cave before, and now he had let it stretch and soar across a vast plane. With each stride, his mind grew into this new power. Yan felt like he was making progress. As he stared at the shell, he fell into a trance, as if he were sleeping with his eyes open, ignoring everything that wasn’t the seashell and the force needed to move it. Then he would “wake,” tired beyond reason, and wait until he had recovered enough to start all over.

It was during one of these resting phases that he started asking questions again. This new consciousness he was gradually acquiring made him hesitate. After all, why did he even want to succeed? What did magic matter to him? It seemed like such a difficult discipline to get such meager

results. Just knocking a coin over? He had wasted three days of his life contemplating a coin.

To better know his own being, to touch his own essence—that could surely suffice to please him. Was there really any benefit to moving little objects without touching them? Did he really need something like that?

He suddenly realized what was happening. He was at the edge of a breakthrough, and this realization scared him to his core. He was frightened that if he continued, he could never go back. Then again, perhaps he would never want to.

Fear froze him for a long time, until he remembered what it was he wanted the most. An image of Léti appeared clearly in his mind, and with it his fear vanished. He wanted this skill, because he had so little else. Because Léti had so many talents. He wanted this power, not for himself, but for her.

Hardened by this realization, he made himself concentrate, as he had taught himself to do. His Will had already shown itself on the cliff, and had saved both of their lives in an impossible feat. He tried to remember this moment, the emotions he had felt. The memories flooded his mind, much too strong and clear for his taste. His closest friend's terrified face. The reefs forty yards below. His powerlessness to save her.

He had rushed to reach her, swinging one leg out into the void, and then the next, and then his whole body. He had grasped onto the rocky cliff face, putting himself in grave danger.

But he still couldn't do anything.

He had given her his hand, and she grabbed it with the full force of her desire to live. But he couldn't do anything. There had been nothing left to do but wait for one of their arms to weaken and then plummet into the abyss. He had clenched his teeth, pulled, pulled, feeling nothing but Léti's hands in his own, and his will to pull her up. Suddenly, he understood. He felt the power that he had unleashed. He felt it *now*.

Blood pounded in his temples, and his skin went cold. He was out of breath, his head spinning, having relived all of it—the cliff and their hands and Léti's terrified face.

He opened his eyes and stared at the queen moon. It was a long time before he realized what he had done.

The little blue shell was laying on its side.



“We would like to make an offering to the cult,” Corenn repeated to the surprised assassin. “There’s nothing stopping us, is there?”

The priest read his assistant’s face, looking for a cue. All he saw was an expression just as surprised as his own.

“Indeed, nothing’s stopping you,” he answered after gathering his thoughts.

Corenn had caught him slightly off guard. A crack in the Zü’s armor. She forced her way in.

“Your cult claims that the Goddess can express her will through any mortal intermediary. I have a feeling Zuïa is with me. Not the impious one who uses her messengers as lowly hit men.”

The Zü listened, resigned. At the beginning of their exchange he thought the Mother had come to plea for mercy, as everyone judged by the Goddess did before receiving their sentence. In which case it would have been easy to refuse and simply savor the familiar moment. But the woman’s words weren’t beseeching. They were... unsettling.

Even in a cult as fanatical as the Züu, the less dim-witted ones learned to question themselves. Why did Zuïa talk through the mouths of mere mortals? And why did they have to make an offering? And since there were no new temples constructed, where did all the money go? Were the Judges really just complacent opportunists who had built an earthly Lus’an for themselves?

The Zü didn’t like feeling doubt. Zuïa judged; he carried out the sentence, full stop. The Kaulienne was disturbing his peace of mind, pulling the ground from underneath what he held to be most true. He resented her for it.

“We’re ready to make a substantial offering,” she persisted. “Zuïa speaks through me. She doesn’t want to judge us.”

Aha! The Zü suddenly regained his composure, and the world returned to normal. Just like all the others condemned by the Goddess, this woman was asking for the same thing: mercy. She had gone about it in a different way, though, more insidiously than others, which could have fooled him if he hadn’t been careful.

“Impossible,” he stated with satisfaction. “The Goddess would never let anyone usurp her word. You’ve been condemned, and no human will ever change that.”



Corenn let out a sigh of disappointment. Though her chances had always been slim, she still held out hope that she could win. These killers were too indoctrinated to think for themselves, though. For a brief moment, she wondered what kind of strange indoctrination they must have received to have such a twisted sense of reality.

She exchanged a grim look with Grigán; then, she collected herself. The fight wasn't over yet, and in a flash she dug in again, determined to win this war of words. No more need to speak in veiled terms now. She got right down to it.

"We would like to know the name of your benefactor," she stated frankly. "Or any other piece of information about him. We're prepared to pay for it."

"And next you're going to ask me to kill him," he rebutted, having fully regained his confidence. "Classic. But neither one is possible."

Grigán signaled discreetly to Corenn that it was time for them to leave. Nothing else was going to be gleaned from the discussion, and with each passing moment the situation became more dangerous. The Mother ignored him. She hadn't finished yet.

"I have one final request. One that you can't refuse," she announced. "I would like the messengers to grant us a delay in carrying out the sentence. To give us time to pay for our sins."

The Zü stared at her silently. This too was something he had never seen before. This request was reasonable, and perfectly in line with his beliefs.

"How long would this delay be?"

"It's up to you to decide. At least a few moons, of course. And we will make an offering to the cult."

He thought for a moment. He had landed so many victories in this battle that he was inclined to accept her inconsequential request.

"I have to think it over," he replied. "Consult my superiors. It's a new idea."

"I understand," Corenn acknowledged, happy enough to not hear a definitive no.

"Let's meet again, next dékade. I'll have an answer by then."

Corenn nodded and paid them leave with a polite bow. Grigán left, displaying a look of utter scorn.

“What a waste,” he muttered as they reached the exit. “Forty golden terces and all of the risk for that.”

The Mother didn’t respond. Later she would get him to understand that they had made progress. For now she was too tired.

“Follow them,” the Zü whispered to his sidekick. “I want to know where those rats are hiding.”



Léti was starting to worry; she wondered if Corenn and Grigán had left the Small Palace while she and Rey were visiting the Courtyard of Games. They had been inside for far too long. She tried in vain to ignore another possibility, a much more pessimistic one, that maybe her aunt and the warrior would never leave the palace. This idea kept nagging her, and even Rey’s banter was ineffective at driving the notion from her mind. She kept her eyes fixed on the monumental porch of the palace that merchants of all types shuffled across in both directions. Finally, the jelenis guarding the entrance moved aside to let Corenn pass, immediately followed by Grigán.

Léti sighed, relieved, but she knew not to approach them, despite her boiling curiosity. They had agreed on a plan, and she had to respect it.

The warrior scanned the surroundings and easily located them. Without signaling to them, he hurried down a back alley with Corenn.

Rey and Grigán had mapped out the way back to the Rominian Pig during their last trip to Lorelia. They had to choose an indirect route, to avoid drawing attention to Bellec’s inn. They would traverse the most deserted neighborhoods to make it easier to spot anyone following them. They waited and watched the palace, as planned. What they saw was just as Grigán feared.

A Zü shoved his way to the exit. Even from their distant position, they could see how he cleared a path quickly. As each jeleni approached, trying to bar his way, the murderer would show the interloper the poisoned dagger he had just retrieved from the pile of weapons. His intentions were clear and menacing. The guards stepped aside every time.

Usually, a guard would have stopped the Zü from leaving so quickly after someone else had left, but the jelenis, despite being elite soldiers, weren’t suicidal. The guards could have easily killed the fanatic, with some help from their dogs, but punishment for interfering with the cult would

quickly follow. One day or another, they would see another Zü sent their way with a poisoned dagger in his hand and revenge in his eyes.

The Züu didn't grant any importance to personal interests. Only those of the cult counted. It was this devotion to the brotherhood that made them so powerful. To attack one of them was the same as defying all of the messengers, and one did not defy them without consequences.

The killer swept his gaze around the exit, and easily found his prey. He rushed after them, doing his best to conceal his red tunic underneath a novice's robe, exactly as Rey had done.

"Let's go," the actor said.

Léti followed him without a word. Determined, her hand clenching her fishermen's knife, the same one she had used on Ji's cliffs. The same blind rage she had felt then masked all her other emotions. Why did Grigán have to be right? Why were the Züu so amoral, dishonorable, deceitful, and cruel?

How many crimes had this one committed? Did he have the blood of other heirs on his hands? Yes, at least indirectly.

They had never really planned out what would happen next, at least not explicitly. Grigán had simply let on that he would be in charge of neutralizing any danger. That seemed like a rather vague assertion. Watching the assassin deftly move through the crowd, Léti knew very well what they could do with the killer. *Every fox finds its bear*. This red fox was about to feel her sharp claws.

The crowd thinned out as they moved along. Trying to be discreet, the Zü stretched the distance between himself and Corenn. Léti and Rey did the same, grinding their teeth as they watched the Zü from behind.

The Loreliens, who were used to street fights, cleared the way for this strange procession. Given the spectacle of a foreign couple followed by two Züu and a murderous-looking woman, the onlookers preferred to scatter.

Soon they made it to their rendezvous point: Enfel the Barber's dead end. Grigán and Corenn turned resolutely to walk down the alley, probably to the Zü's surprise. Léti and Rey followed them.

It wasn't really a dead end; it had even once been a common road in the city's past. It had been renamed after the condemnation of the Western Door of the old city's fortifications. Not a single cart or mule driver passed through here anymore, and the majority of the shops had closed down a

long time ago. The street was deserted and cast in shadow from the multistory buildings that surrounded it.

Corenn and Grigán did an about-face once they had almost reached the end of the street. The Zü tried to hide behind an enormous façade beam of a building. It was only then that the assassin finally perceived Rey and Léti.

Rey's disguise must have made him do a double take. First he thought he had reinforcements, but his opinion quickly changed when he saw a young woman with a knife in her hand. Despite the tunic and robe, this was clearly no ally.

"You shouldn't have followed us," Corenn declared, stepping forward. "Leave."

The Zü looked at the four strangers that surrounded him, making eye contact with each of them, uncertain how to proceed. He had failed in his mission. It was the first time. And it would be the last.

"Leave," the Mother repeated. "We won't try anything. Léti, let him pass."

Rey moved a little to the side to let the Zü pass. But Léti didn't move an inch. She pointed her blade at the Zü, a gesture that would have seemed ridiculous to her just two moons ago. The handle felt at home in her hand now, and she stood her ground.

Grigán ordered, more sternly than Corenn, "Let him by, Léti."

The young woman snapped out of it and took three steps to the side, without taking her eyes off the killer. She returned his murderous stare with the same intensity. She no longer felt fear.

The Zü didn't either. He had failed. The only way to win back the Goddess's favor was to do so dramatically.

He was surrounded by four enemies, and he knew he had to kill them all.

He slowly turned to leave, as these impious idiots expected him to. Then threw himself at the young woman, brandishing his poisoned dagger. Something chimed against the wall next to him, and he turned his head by reflex. The instant after, cold steel invaded his throat. He put his hands to his neck and found a bubbling stream. He tried in vain to contain it and fell to the ground, drowning in his own blood.

Léti watched the Zü's agony in disgust. From his first step, she knew what he was planning, and she had prepared herself.

Rey had reacted instantly, but his dagger, thrown too quickly, had missed its target. Léti saw the killer jump toward her, turn his head, and easily sliced her blade across his throat, drawing a dark line on his neck.

The blood escaping from his wound was pooling, and the man couldn't stop panting, grimacing in pain. Léti turned around and felt her stomach heave. She vomited painfully.

Corenn led the group toward the exit, and Grigán joined them shortly after. By the time they exited the alley, the panting had stopped and an intense silence settled over them.

"Let's get out of here," he ordered as he sheathed his sword. "Even if no one likes the Züu, I have no desire to explain myself to the militia. It's already a sordid-enough affair."

Léti cried on Rey's shoulder the whole way.



They couldn't speak freely in front of Raji. The little smuggler had been waiting for them impatiently at Bellec's inn, worrying more than anything about his business's health. The Lorelien wouldn't rest easy until his unwelcome guests had left his warehouse for good. He hoped their next destination was far, far away.

The heirs were impatient to be alone so that they could bring everyone up to speed. Between the Barber's dead end and the inn, they had had only enough time to exchange a few words, which was certainly not enough to satisfy their curiosity. They were also anxious to console Léti, whose tears were continually streaming down her face. Silence was imperative in the long, narrow tunnel that led to Raji's farm.

It was with relief that they finally opened the door to their underground lair. Yan and Bowbaq immediately rushed to meet them, even more impatient than their friends. The looks of defeat on the returning heirs' faces were a bad sign to those who had stayed behind.

Raji finally took leave of his guests, not bothering to say good-bye. Léti burst into tears again, unable to bear the idea that Yan would judge her for her deed. Rey comforted her as much as he could, putting his arm around her shoulders again, just as he had done the whole way back. An innocent gesture, but one that nevertheless plunged Yan into a feeling of deep anxiety.

Under other circumstances, the young Kaulien would have rushed over to console his friend, no matter what the cause of her sadness. Someone had already beat him to it, though, so he looked on silently.

He felt weak in the knees. He turned away from the group to lean against the wall, half-listening to Corenn and Grigán's story. He didn't give a thought to announcing his success at the magician's test. That didn't mean anything now. He had lost Léti forever. Magic didn't matter. Nothing else mattered.



When night fell they gathered again for a “Council of the Heirs,” as Corenn liked to call their meetings when they made important decisions or proposed theories about the secret of Ji. A nostalgic wink at the Permanent Council of the Grand House.

The Mother had kept them from opening up the debate immediately upon their return. Grigán's frustration, Léti's distress, and Yan's gloomy mood—which everyone noticed except the person he most hoped would notice—would have greatly altered their ability to think.

Now they were calm and rested enough to broach the questions that had dogged them since day one of this adventure: What to do? Where to go?

Corenn retold in a few words what happened at the Small Palace, adding a few details she had left out in the first telling. She finished by telling the story of the tragic battle with the Zü.

“It's a shame that the man hadn't simply given up his search. That would have made things a lot easier, now.”

Léti nodded, with an empty gaze. She took a deep breath and cleared her voice with some difficulty. Her friends gave her their full attention.

“I didn't want to... I didn't want to kill him,” she said softly. “I mean, not like that. I regret that. It was so... I was so scared...”

“You reacted exactly as you should have,” Grigán affirmed.

Rey added, “He was the one who attacked you.”

“You did well,” Corenn confirmed. “He was an assassin. You were merely defending yourself. You did well.”

Each one of them gave her words of encouragement, but her eyes glimmered with tears again.

In normal times, Yan would have found the right words. But since seeing Léti under the actor's arm, he had no more desire. He stayed sullen and silent, which hurt Léti even more.

"He... he seemed to really *suffer*..." she started to say before breaking into tearful sobbing.

The heirs didn't know how to respond. Disturbed by this emotional display, but powerless to comfort the young woman, they exchanged unsure looks.

After a long silence, Grigán stood up, his face looking grim. He circumvented the rest of the group and grabbed Léti firmly by the shoulders.

"Look at me. Look at me!" he ordered the young woman, who covered her eyes while hiccuping noisily.

The heirs waited, dumbfounded, for what would happen next. Though he was irascible, Grigán was rarely so furious. Yan and Rey even worried that the warrior was about to hit Léti. No, he wouldn't...

"Look at me! What will you do the next time a Zü tries to kill you? Answer me! What will you do?"

Léti answered despondently, "I don't know!" Her face covered in tears. "I don't know..."

"You will strike him!" the warrior screamed. "You will strike him, even if it kills him, even if it hurts him! You will strike him to save your own skin! And your friends! You understand?"

The young woman looked at each one of her companions, all the people who had protected her, defended her, rescued her. Her gaze fell on Yan's face. The young man had already risked his life for her. He didn't love her, and yet he was ready to sacrifice himself for her! Shouldn't she learn something from that? Her remorse: Was it anything more than a new form of selfishness?

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes," she said with a whimper.

"Good! When you strike someone with a sword or any blade, it hurts! Inevitably! But he was the one who forced you to do it! *Him*! Does learning to fight still seem like fun to you?"

"No," Léti, whose tears had dried up, responded. "I mean yes; I still want to learn."

This calmed the warrior, who said, “Good, a session full of exercises on hurting people first thing tomorrow! And I don’t want to hear any more of this... senselessness!”

“All right,” Léti responded, lifting up her head.

The warrior’s lecture had shocked her enough to shake her out of her pity. Enough for her to find a new motivation.

“And it would do you well to join us as well, Bowbaq,” Grigán added, encouraged by his success. “One of these days, you’ll come across someone who isn’t scared of your size.”

The giant reminded them, “I don’t want to kill. Defend myself, yes, but not kill.”

“Fine, whatever you want! You should learn how to knock someone out; at least then you could get away!”

The warrior sat back down before anyone could respond, very content with himself. Blowing off some steam had done him good, and he told himself he should resort to this type of solution more often.

The others looked at him, surprised. Before them was a new Grigán. The atmosphere was still heavy from his shouting.

“As for me, I would like to be able to kill several of them all at once,” Rey said, flatly. “Can you teach me that?”

Everyone laughed at the joke, and the heavy air in the room dissipated.

“Tell them one of your jokes. That will immediately make them run away,” the warrior responded, with the same comedic success as Rey’s joke.

Once they had all calmed down, Rey asked, “Tell me, did you know you were being followed?”

“Of course,” the warrior responded, unable to mask his pride. “Corenn briefly spoke with a Goranese man on our way out. That gave me plenty of time to see the killer slip away from his master to follow us.”

The others, curious now, looked at Corenn.

“The Goranese man was offering me a deal, that’s all. It happened to us dozens of times! But this one might interest master Raji, so I took the time to hear him out.”

Rey warned her, “If Raji finds out that you used his name in the Small Palace, he will fall over dead.”

“I didn’t say it. I’ll pass on the information to Raji, and he can do with it what he will. A favor for a favor.”



There was a long silence. They hadn't yet mentioned their main problem, as if the question itself were too daunting to bring up. Someone had to do it.

Rey started, "So what are we supposed to do now?"

"I think it's obvious," Grigán responded. "We head to Junine as fast as we can. Queen Séhane is our only chance of finding any other heirs, if any are left. Or at least more information."

"She's also our main suspect," Rey reminded them. "The only person mixed up in this affair who has enough gold to buy the Züu. Also, the only one who hasn't been attacked."

"At least as far as we know," Corenn corrected. "Who among you has had the latest news from the Baronies?"

No one, of course. The Mother was right.

"And our enemy is a *man*. He may just be an intermediary, sure, but that's unlikely. I have already met Séhane, and I don't think she's guilty," the Mother said.

"All right, all's well then. Let's leave for Junine as soon as we can."

"I think we should meet with the Züu again. Wait a décade and return to the Small Palace."

Corenn's idea was a surprise to everyone. It seemed too dangerous, and the gains hardly worth the gamble.

"We can't return to the Small Palace," Grigán tried to reason with her. "I think we've already risked our lives enough as it is."

"The Züu might be willing to grant a delay of our sentence. I think that's worth it to wait. To minimize the risks, I will go alone, of course."

The heirs protested spiritedly, spontaneously throwing out a series of "out of the question"s and "oh no"s, which made Corenn smile. Her friends thought that *she* was the unreasonable one.

"But really, what could you possibly hope for?" Grigán shouted, exasperated. "The Züu are merciless. They would never help us. Ever! To get rid of them, we would have to kill them all, which is impossible, or find our real enemy. That's our only chance! You said so yourself!"

"Yes, and we could do that much more easily if they gave us a delay. Besides, I'm hoping I can find out something more from another conversation."

Taking Grigán's place, Rey objected, "They will never reveal anything. They would refuse to even show you the sky, if they knew it was

important to you. They love the mystery and fear that they inspire. And after all, there's no reason to expect that they know anything!"

"But knowing what they know would help us a lot, wouldn't it?" Bowbaq asked timidly.

"Of course it would," Corenn responded in a weary voice.

"I see." The giant looked pensive. After a pause, he added, "Corenn might be right."

"What?" Grigán exclaimed.

"Well, if returning to the palace can help me return as quickly as possible to Arkary, then let's do it. I will go with you, Corenn."

"There you have it, another idiotic idea!" the warrior said explosively. "Very well, since everyone is spouting ridiculous ideas tonight, I propose that we forget about it for a moment. No objections?"

There were none, and the decision was put off until the following day, to Bowbaq's great relief.

The giant needed some time to think and to make a choice. If he was wrong, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

Which could very well be a short one.



Yan let Grigán know he was heading out for some fresh air, asking him not to seal the trapdoor just yet. He embraced the stillness and purity of the night air, and it helped to calm his troubled mind. He wandered for a while, not sure where his aimless steps would lead him.

Raji was lounging under his porch, watching the stars, a pitcher of Cyr beer within reach. Yan waved to him subtly, and thought about chatting with the smuggler. He eventually decided he wasn't in the mood for a conversation and walked off in the opposite direction to be alone and mull over his problems.

After pacing for a time Yan decided that he hadn't devoted enough of his time to Léti. Not only had he missed the day of the Promise, he wasn't there for his friend when she needed him.

Léti didn't love him, and he was to blame. She had taken a liking to Rey, to no one's surprise. Yan too was quite fond of the actor, but for Léti, this affection was obviously turning into something more like love.

He could see everything clearly now. He wasn't frustrated, angry, or distraught—just disappointed. Terribly disappointed. For him, Léti had always represented his future, his hopes and dreams, the best of this world. What did he have now? His life was already shaping up to be a long and tedious wait.

The stable door creaked open, letting one of the heirs through. It took a moment for Yan to recognize the approaching figure of Corenn.

“Good evening, young man. I guess neither of us can sleep?”

“No, not really... I don't think anyone will sleep well tonight,” he added after a pause.

“Just imagine how hard it must be for the Züu!” she joked.

Yan smiled, but there was no laughter in his heart. In any case, it seemed very unlikely that the red killers would have a fitful sleep. The very thought that they could sleep like anyone else seemed odd and disquieting.

“I want to ask you a favor,” Corenn admitted. “Talk to Léti. Take her for a walk. Say some comforting words to her. She needs to get her mind off the violence she's seen in the past few days.”

Yan searched the Mother's face, wondering if there weren't other motivations lurking behind her request. The Kaulienne was smart and perceptive, but how much did she know?

“That's a good idea,” he agreed. “But it would definitely be more effective if someone else took care of it.”

From what he could tell, Rey, Bowbaq, or Corenn were just as well suited. And none of them would have to suffer in return.

“I don't think so,” the Mother asserted, a mischievous smile on her lips. “Things are rarely as simple as they appear, Yan. Trust me; go see Léti. She'll surprise you; I'm sure of it.”

Corenn spoke in veiled terms, but her message was clear. The fact that at least one person thought he still had a chance raised his spirits a little.

They walked along in a somewhat awkward silence, self-conscious of their newfound intimacy. Eventually Yan remembered that he also had something to tell her.

“I've done it, you know,” he stated blankly.

“What's that?”

“The coin. Well, the test, I mean. I made an object fall over. It took some time, but I've done it nonetheless.”

Corenn stopped abruptly and solemnly studied the young man's face. Was he kidding? No, he was very serious.

"Impossible," she muttered. "That's impossible. You must be mistaken."

Corenn didn't dare believe it. If he really had succeeded, that meant that Yan carried such a powerful Will in him that he could one day become the most skilled magician in the world. The idea that she had helped unveil such a power made her shudder.

"No, it's true," Yan insisted, not understanding the emotion in Corenn's voice.

"The wind. It must have been the wind."

"I thought about that, but there wasn't a breath of wind when I did it. And I also switched out the coin for my queen moon, and with its wider base the wind couldn't have... I hope you don't consider that to be cheating?" he added, seeing the troubled look on the Mother's face.

Corenn's eyes fixed on the little blue shell that hung from Yan's neck. It was heavier, more stable, and its shape more irregular than the scarred three-queen coin. Using the shell would have only made the task harder. No, it wasn't cheating, but was he lying?

To Yan's surprise, she gently placed her hands on the young man's shoulders. He didn't imagine his success was going to cause such a debate. Didn't he just do what was asked?

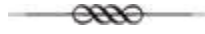
"Listen, Yan. It's impossible for you to have succeeded because... well, it's just impossible! The test's only purpose is to try your patience. You wait for a few months in frustration, and then you receive your training. I don't know anyone who managed to succeed without studying for several moons. That would be as if... as if you knew how to write before learning how to speak. So I'll ask you one more time and afterward will never again doubt your word. Yan, is it true?"

Witnessing such surprise, the young man came to have doubts himself. He never actually saw the shell fall... but he did feel the Will. His Will.

"It's true," he confirmed, with as much conviction as he could muster.

Corenn released his shoulders and paced around under the starry sky. She needed some time for it to settle in her mind. So Yan had an incredible aptitude for magic. All right. It wasn't going to be as easy for their other friends to accept. She decided to keep it a secret for a few more days, at least until she witnessed the miracle for herself first.

Three days. Yan had done it in three days! And he thought that was a long time...



With the exception of Rey, all the heirs slept poorly, as Yan had predicted. It took Yan a long time to fall asleep, his mind troubled by the day's exhausting experiences. Léti relived the Zü's agony in her dreams; Grigán tossed and turned nonstop, vexed by their disagreements; while Corenn spent a long time reflecting on the barrage of events that kept throwing them into chaos.

As for Bowbaq, he didn't sleep at all. He dedicated the night to a long meditation on good and evil, the forbidden and the necessary, reason and emotion. By daybreak, he had made his decision.

He got up early, before everyone else, and prepared a customary meal from Arkary. There were smoked meats, dried fruits, rolls of cheese, and biscuits from Lermian, accompanied by an infusion of cozé. The giant couldn't find any milo, though—the traditional drink of the White Country—in Raji's storehouse.

As it was raining in Lorelia again, Bowbaq prepared the meal in the stable, and presented it on a little table he had improvised from a few wooden planks and logs. The cozé was still boiling when Grigán joined him. The warrior looked just like he felt: very tired.

"I was intending to complain about all of the noise up here," he said, smiling. "But I am so hungry that I'll eat first. Thank you, my friend."

Bowbaq gave him an awkward smile, feeling his resolve weaken. If the others didn't arrive very soon, he would never have the courage to confess.

As if answering his prayer, Corenn, Léti, Rey, and eventually Yan joined them, all showing their surprise and thanks. They all saw it as a sign that the giant was getting better, and the news delighted them.

Bowbaq's heart beat faster and faster in his chest. He could wait no longer and spoke slowly to the group. "I don't deserve... your friendship," he announced, solemnly.

Their smiles grew, and then immediately disappeared when they realized the giant wasn't joking.

"What are you talking about now?" Grigán grumbled.

The warrior felt a little guilty. Maybe Bowbaq was hurt by his remark yesterday?

"I could... I can help us," he confessed. "There's something I can do. I didn't mention it to anyone. I've known it, but I didn't say anything. That's why I don't deserve your friendship."

Corenn and Grigán, who had known Bowbaq for a long time, were skeptical about how serious his tone was. The giant had always tended to exaggerate. But Yan, Rey, and Léti took him very seriously.

"What are you talking about?" the actor asked. "We all are doing the best we can; you have nothing to feel bad about."

Bowbaq insisted, "Yes, I do. I am an erjak, you know..."

"And so?"

"Well... I can enter the minds of animals, or at least mammals. Meaning, all mammals," he finished gravely.

Corenn suddenly smacked her forehead with the flat of her hand. She understood. It was so obvious. How had she never thought of it?

Yan, too, thought he understood. He pushed the giant to continue, though, just to make sure it was perfectly clear.

"Human minds?" he asked with interest. "You can read people's thoughts?"

"Sort of, yes," Bowbaq confirmed, already relieved to have said it.

Rey interjected, "Well, I can recite the Rominian alphabet backward. Come on, Bowbaq, it's a little too early in the morning for me to swallow something like that. Especially after such a meal."

"But it's true," the giant answered, offended.

Corenn chuckled. Their little group, considered by the Züu to be a contemptible band of fugitives, was proving to be a resourceful bunch. *These times are bringing out the best in us*, she thought to herself, feeling philosophical.

"Bowbaq, why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"It's... forbidden," the giant explained. "By telling you now, I am betraying my erjak's oath." He hastily added, "It's the first time I have."

They understood very well, since they were all familiar with how valuable an oath, or promise, was, and the sacrifice their friend was making.

"All of you can? All the erjaks?" Léti said, surprised.

"Yes, all of us. Some better than others. Like with animals, it all depends on our skill." Bowbaq felt much better. His friends weren't angry

with him. He took advantage of their silence to confess more. “That’s how they discovered my abilities. When I was little, I would sometimes visit people’s minds when they were sleeping. I read their memories. I shared their dreams... I didn’t realize it. I thought that everyone did. Then one day, I slipped into someone’s mind who was awake. He could tell immediately. The entire clan was furious. It was only then that I realized it was *impolite* and that I was the only one in the clan who had that ability.”

Grigán spoke for the group when he said, “That couldn’t have been an enjoyable experience.”

The warrior had spent two years in the White Country and knew the weight the Arques gave to the word *impolite*. Bowbaq must have been treated like a perverted, disrespectful little boy for several moons, probably even several years. It was no surprise that he had kept this secret for such a long time.

“Who taught you?” Corenn asked. “Who asked you to take the oath?”

“An erjak from another clan, whom my father had met during the great hunts. I was his apprentice for several moons, but he taught me only the rules of the fellowship. Like, *never* enter a human’s mind, for example.”

Corenn wondered if this rule weren’t just one of the Arques’ many superstitions. Or was it more of a strategy to keep their powers secret? Knowing the mystic persona of the tribes of the White Country, the first guess was probably the right one. Either way, it wasn’t important here.

“So you could read a Züu’s mind?”

“Yes, I mean only a single Zü at a time. And only once. The one whose mind I invade will immediately be aware of it, and also know who is responsible. In general, it turns even the gentlest people into a seething rage. Just like with animals.”

“But how... how can you *read* a mind? What does it appear as?”

“I am not sure. With sleeping people, I follow their thoughts, that’s all. It is as if I were seeing with their eyes. To communicate with most animals, I am content to send them short phrases or simple images. With a man who’s awake... I’ve only tried it once, and his thoughts flowed too quickly. I think we will have to make him think about what we care to find out. If not, it will just be noise... do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Why don’t you try it on us? If you want to,” Grigán asked. If it worked, the warrior might let himself be talked into a return to the Small

Palace. Stealing information from the Züu, despite their efforts to hide it... now *that* was a pleasant idea!

Rey declared, "I volunteer!"

"Me too," Léti offered up.

"Well, then, I'll happily let you be the first. Anyhow, my mind is written too poorly to be read," said the actor.

Among the group, Bowbaq was the least excited about the idea. His education had taught him that the act was always something that was very *impolite*.

"Promise me you won't get mad," the giant implored.

"Of course not," the young woman responded, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm volunteering, after all!"

Corenn suggested, "Think of something very precise. An object, a name, something simple."

Léti agreed and looked for a subject. She chose to concentrate on the standing-sleeper that she had raised several years earlier.

"I'm ready."

"Here we go," the giant announced, sounding less certain than he would have liked.

A moment later, he was with Léti, in her mind. He had forgotten how easy it was to make contact with humans.

The young woman fought this intrusion mentally, with the predicted reflex. But Bowbaq had already had enough time to see.

"You were thinking about a standing-sleeper and... of Yan?"

Léti didn't respond right away. The experience was unpleasant. Truly unpleasant. She understood how someone who was not forewarned could descend into a blind rage.

"You're right," she answered. "You're exactly right."

She kept herself from contradicting the giant. There would have been too many embarrassing explanations.

He had read her correctly, after all, hadn't he?



Bowbaq refused to test his powers on any of the other heirs. Reading minds violated the privacy of one's innermost thoughts, and the giant's sense of courtesy didn't let him even consider it. Nevertheless, a single trial was



convincing enough, and the heirs made the unanimous decision to return to the Small Palace to steal the Züu's secrets. This meant that they were going to spend another dékade at Raji's place, for lack of knowing any safer place. It also meant that Corenn, Grigán, and Bowbaq would face a danger even more serious than the first time. The Züu would be more than ready for them on their second visit, armed with clear instructions from their superiors. This did not bode well for the heirs.

They would have to be prepared to immediately flee Lorelia afterward, regardless of how the meeting went. And the preparations had to be flawless. Grigán set right to hashing out the best possible plan.

This dékade of "inactivity" was full of activities. Encouraged by Corenn, not to mention Bowbaq and his mind-reading display to Léti, Yan spent the entire first day with her, to the young woman's delight. Corenn and Grigán, both teachers by coincidence, had to quiet their impatience to work with such talented students. Corenn especially, as she was anxious to let the other members of the group in on her and Yan's secret.

Rey pestered Bowbaq until he agreed to explain his technique for mind reading. The giant tried, but he couldn't seem to find the right words. Bowbaq didn't know how to explain the inner workings of a talent he was born with, and he was too polite to tell the actor that it was a gift and not a talent that could be learned. Rey finally gave up, but not after a few good laughs. As a consolation he had the giant promise to accompany him to the Courtyard of Games one day if their lives ever returned to normal. Bowbaq agreed, welcoming this display of friendship, without truly understanding what Rey was expecting from him.

Corenn transferred the sum Raji requested for their stay and also paid for the additional dékade in advance. At first the little smuggler's face turned sour as he understood their extended stay. His anger melted away, terce by terce, as the stack of coins Corenn placed in his hands grew.

She began to worry that the group's financial situation was going to become an issue. But they had made an agreement with Raji, and after all, they had helped themselves to enough of his supplies to make it worth it.

The little man protested loudly when Corenn told him about the deal they were offered at the Small Palace. He didn't calm down until he realized his name had remained a secret. Still, he pouted the rest of the day.

The sun set on this rare, calm day, and the heirs reconvened. Grigán announced he had conceived a getaway plan and was ready to run the risk.

They listened to him, contributed their suggestions, and soon everything was set. It was certainly going to be dangerous, but no less dangerous than the talk with the Züu itself.

The evening flew by. By talking about real, future events like this, they were able to push the island of Ji, the portal, and the other world out of their minds. Only somewhat, though, and never completely.

“You might have been able to read the child’s mind,” Yan suggested. “The one on the other side.”

Bowbaq held back a horrified grimace. To see into the mind of a *demon*! Such an experience surely would have scarred his sanity.

They changed the subject. The secret of Ji was still beyond reach. The Small Palace market, on the other hand, was close at hand. They had less than a *dékade* to get ready.



Zamerine stared at his subordinate with open scorn. The Judge, chief of all the Züu killers in the Upper Kingdoms, was a feared and respected master. Mostly feared.

“Say that again,” he asked his agent from the Small Palace. “You met face-to-face with two of the fugitives that the Goddess has condemned, right here in Lorelia, where you have more than forty men working for you, and now you are telling me that they are still alive? And that *you don’t know* where they are hiding?”

“I had them followed,” the accused reminded him. “Zlek got himself killed. He failed, not me.”

“These impious wretches should have never left the Small Palace,” Zamerine said, curtly.

“But the agreements...”

“You know that these so-called agreements with the Lorelien kings are worthless. We don’t obey the will of men; we carry out the Goddess’s judgment. The primary mission of every messenger. Have you forgotten, Zeanos?”

His pride injured, Zeanos almost responded angrily. But he promptly remembered who he was dealing with and thought better of it. He lowered his eyes to the floor, worried.

“No, of course not,” he managed to mumble.

“Do you agree that you made an error?”

“We weren’t even armed!” Zeanos objected.

The presence of Zamerine’s assistant troubled him more than he wanted to admit. Dyree was like the Judge’s personal executioner, the one who delivered the grand priest’s personal sentences. He was the messenger of the messengers.

“Well, so what? The *hati* is a sacred weapon, but not an obligatory one. Between the two of you, you could have easily executed at least one of the fugitives.”

Zeanos thought it best not to respond. The Züu were under close watch in the Small Palace, and while the jelenis did cede them passage under the threat of their *hati*, the archers would have been merciless, slaughtering the messengers at the least sign of aggression. He and Zlek would have died for nothing. Just to gouge out one of the Ramgrith’s eyes or tear off one of the Kaulienne’s ears? Of course, Zamerine already knew all that, but he didn’t want to acknowledge it.

“I think you have been dealing with... exterior relations for too long,” the Judge started to say. “You have grown soft. How long has it been since you delivered your last sentence?”

“Two years,” the accused hastily added with pride, “but I have seventeen notches on my blade.”

“Dyree has twenty-five. Right, Dyree?”

The assistant responded with a nod, like a well-trained animal. He gripped his *hati*, and Zeanos waited for him to show his trophies. Instead, Dyree stared at him with a grin, leaving his dagger sheathed.

*I didn’t betray Zuia*, the accused told himself. *I don’t deserve her sentence.*

“So, my friend. How will you make up for your error?”

Zamerine made his threat as clear as if he had said, “It’s your fault they’re still alive. If you don’t fix it, Dyree will slit your throat and send you to the swamps of Lus’an.” Thankfully, Zeanos had a few ideas.

He cleared his throat, as much to get his voice back as to force himself to swallow, which he was having trouble doing.

“Hmm, well... as I told you earlier, after Zlek went after them, I left the palace and paid Darlane a little visit. He eagerly agreed to place his men at the city gates and along the docks. They saw no sign of the fugitives. So for a start, we already know that.”

“You know how unreliable the Guild’s reports can be,” Zamerine reminded him, irritated. “A sighting would have been a useful piece of information. A non-sighting, what good is that? I hope that you didn’t base your entire search around this witless idea.”

Zeanos heard this rebuke as a blow. He was scrambling to prove his usefulness, but if Zamerine refuted all of his arguments, this was going to be a difficult task.

“Indeed, Judge. But I *really* made a point of convincing Darlane of how important the mission was. And I was present when he gave directions to his subordinates. He, too, was very convincing, promising a large reward for whoever spotted them. Moreover, my description was very precise. I think that, this time, we can trust Darlane’s word.”

“Admittedly,” Zamerine conceded after thinking about it for a moment.

Zeanos relaxed a little and said more confidently, “So they haven’t left the city. I had someone visit all of the inns, and I still have people on watch at the largest ones. Of course, they haven’t turned up yet. There are no records of them registering under their real names, nor the ones they used at the Small Palace.”

“Of course not. Do you think I am such an imbecile that you have to explain such obvious details? Do you think they are idiots too? The Ramgrith has eluded us for nearly four dékades. Did you really think that he would check in to an inn under his real name?”

Zeanos could only mumble, “No, Judge. I agree. I just wanted to make sure. To be methodical about it.”

“And I have to say that your speculation still doesn’t hold. They didn’t leave through any of the main gates. So what? Getting out of Lorelia isn’t that difficult. Dozens of smugglers do it every day. We ourselves come and go as we please without telling anyone. What exactly are you trying to say?”

“I mean there’s no way they can escape now, no matter what they do. If they are still in the city, as I believe they are, they’ll be spotted coming out of an inn or at one of the gates. If they’ve already left, they will come back, whether it’s to return to the Small Palace or to board a ship to Junine. All we have to do is station a few men on the docks.”

Zamerine appreciated this idea, if only because he had already thought of it himself long before. The sole reason for this interview had been to

verify that his subordinate was competent. Zeanos had disappointed him. He hadn't reacted to the situation quickly enough. If he had waited any longer, the fugitives would have had a chance to escape.

The Accuser had already informed him that they would head for the Baronies. Where he got this information was a mystery, even if Zuïa spoke through his mouth. But all of his predictions had been true up to this point. The fugitives were planning on crossing the Median Sea, as sure as the sun would rise at dawn. They would never get the chance to set foot on a boat.

"You will station men in Bénélia as well. There's a chance they will try to leave from there," the Judge ordered.

"Understood," Zeanos agreed, happy to escape with his life.

"I will come with you to the next session at the Small Palace. I am curious to see what these aberrations look like. If they are crazy enough to come back, that is. But you will let me speak for you, this time."

"As you like, Judge."

"Yes, exactly."



Yan had never seen Corenn so nervous. It was almost as if she were the one about to take the magician's test, not him. The Mother had asked Yan to pass it a second time. He wasn't sure he could.

"It took me almost three days the first time," he reminded Corenn. "That means it should take me at least two for the second. I'm guessing we're not going to spend two days hidden away in the forest..."

It was more of a question than a genuine guess. Yan wondered if the Mother would really force him to focus on the test for two days. After all, it was really important to her.

"No, rest assured, if you've already done it before, it should go a lot quicker the second time. Each time that you call on your Will, you reinforce it, stimulate it, train it. Exactly like a muscle. And the first time is quintessential. After the first time, we say that your Will has been 'revealed.'"

From all that she said, Yan took special notice that Corenn still wasn't completely convinced of his ability. Faced with her skepticism, he caught himself doubting too. Then he remembered the flash of hot air, blood

throbbing in his temples, and the power flowing through his mind. This thing that Corenn called Will, he *had* felt it before.

They took position in their usual spot, a few hundred yards from Raji's farm. Yan had spent many decidays there, and it felt like home to him. This patch of forest was his.

"Let's get started right away," Corenn decided. "I would like to join back up with the others as soon as possible."

Yan could tell that Corenn had another motivation for urgency. She truly was impatient to see Yan at work. Just like he must have been a few days earlier when he witnessed her demonstration.

"Um... can I use the queen moon?"

"It's up to you, Yan."

Naturally, he decided to use the pendant: It had brought him luck the first time. He set the coin upright and laid down flat on his stomach right in front of it, like he had done so many times before. He had trouble concentrating at first, aware of an observing presence, despite Corenn's stillness and respectful silence. Then he slipped into a hypnotic state he had learned to create, deeper and deeper still.

His mind closed itself off to everything but the queen moon. He lost his sense of taste first, and his tongue was heavy behind his lips. Then smell. He forgot the wild smells of the Lorelien forest, the sweet odors of the lush grass and the moist soil, and the musky odor from the decaying leaves. His awareness of the world outside himself gradually faded. He forgot about his own body, ignoring the weight of his legs on the ground, the heaviness of his waist, and the strain his elevated torso put on his elbows. He lost touch.

The cracking of branches, birdsongs, the song of thousands of limbs and wings moving every which way, the noises of his own breath, and the beating of his heart fused together into a soft buzz, which got quieter and quieter until it completely disappeared. He forgot sound.

The horizon blurred, the trees were erased, the grass was no longer anything but an imprint of color, which faded into a forgotten forest and sky. Yan no longer saw, he no longer felt or smelled, he no longer heard anything except for the small blue shell. Soon it disappeared too. Now, Yan only focused on the idea of the queen moon. Its essence. Its spirit.

The hardest part was next. The young man was overjoyed to have made it this far on his first try, without losing his concentration and having

to start over. Now he had to act on the shell with nothing but his Will.

This was the true magic.

He drew the necessary strength from within himself, and he gathered this power around an image of Léti once again.

This was the stage where the heart would beat faster. Breathing became heavier. Hands shook. His body warmed, tensed, and then lost all control.

Yan didn't feel any of it. He was anticipating it. He knew it was coming, and that he wouldn't experience it physically until after unleashing his Will, when the rest of the world would impose itself on him again. And even then, after he came back out of the dark, it would only be a memory. What his body knew right at that moment, Yan didn't feel, for it didn't exist anymore.

He finally unleashed his Will and maintained enough control of the emotions that flooded over him to regain awareness of his eyes first. The queen moon quivered, and then toppled over before being lifted by an invisible current that tossed it a foot farther away from him.

Yan then embraced reality's wholeness, but too soon. Swept up in a wave of joy, he awoke to his surroundings all at once: Taste, smell, touch, and sound all came back to him in one painful moment during which all of his senses were amplified. His mind recalibrated them before he let out a cry of pain. Then it was his body's turn to bear the torture as it swung from a fevered state to a horrible languor. If he had complete power and control the moment before, he now found himself exceptionally weak and felt a frozen cold creep down into his bones, his body no longer able to hold any more energy.

He had felt this way before, on the edge of the cliff on Ji. And also after the first time he accomplished the feat. He knew that he had to just wait for his mind to regain control and for his heart to bring order to the chaos. If he were to stand up, make the slightest abrupt movement, his head would spin and he would vomit, there was no doubt about it.

Once he had warmed back up a little, he sat upright and leaned against the nearest tree trunk. It wasn't until then that he remembered Corenn.

The Mother looked grave. She held his wrist to check the beating of his heart. "Everything's going to be fine."

Yan smiled in agreement. He was feeling better. Better and better, actually. He gauged himself strong enough to talk. "Actually, that depends,"

he said, out of breath. “Do I get my diploma, or not?”

“You are officially an apprentice-magician! That is, if you want to be, of course...”

“Yes. I do want that. Can we tell Léti now?”

“Right away!” She helped him up, and they made their way back to Raji’s farm in a slow walk.

“How long did it take? I don’t remember,” Yan asked

“A few centidays at most. Not three days, anyhow!”

Yan nodded and thought. While he had been so focused on the task, he had also lost any perception of time. If Corenn had claimed that a deciday had gone by, he would have believed her without the slightest doubt.

“Umm... what am I supposed to call you now: Master or something?”

“No, of course not! Just address me as you normally would!”

“Okay. Um... Lady Corenn, I don’t mean to offend you or anything, but... what are you going to teach me exactly? I mean, I know how to use my Will, don’t I?”

The Mother let a big smile flower across her face. Yan was smart and talented, but he would forever keep his naiveté, which wasn’t a bad thing.

“Many, many things, my young friend. What you know about magic is only a drop of water in the sea. I’m going to make you drink so many cups that some of them will taste like the sand at the bottom!”

Yan didn’t ask any more questions. If Corenn’s goal was to impress him, she had succeeded.



“No! No, Bowbaq! What kind of move was that? It’s like you’re afraid of breaking your staff!”

Now that he had many students, Grigán was taking his role as master-at-arms very seriously. While Léti was still motivated and driven, Bowbaq needed to be goaded, encouraged, and sometimes scolded. The giant followed the rules of the exercise without any vigor, and he clearly had a hard time handling weapons, despite his great strength. He was using a heavy hardwood log like it was a sleeping snake that shouldn’t be woken.

“I’m scared I will hurt you, my friend,” he confessed, combing through his large beard with his clumsy, fat fingers. “What if you can’t block one of my blows in time?”



The warrior shook his head, discouraged. The staff was the first weapon that he had learned to use, like all Ramgriths, since Griteh's laws forbid a child under the age of ten to use a blade. It was highly unlikely that Bowbaq could catch him off guard, but this argument wasn't enough to convince the giant.

"Too bad then! It would be my fault, not yours! In fact, I would be proud of you."

"Maybe he could train with a mannequin?" Rey, who was watching the scene, suggested.

"I've never seen anyone get attacked by a scarecrow. I doubt that he could learn anything from a sack of straw. Except for how to whack away at an opponent like a brute."

"It's a good way to blow off steam. We could dress it up in my Zü tunic. That would surely motivate Bowbaq," the actor concluded cheerfully.

Léti, who had been waiting her turn, continued, "He would be scared to hurt the straw!"

"I can see that this is my day to really hear it from you," the giant remarked, without any real anger at the innocent teasing.

Rey added, "I wonder what you could see in a mannequin's mind. Certainly some frustration about not being able to fight back."

They all laughed at Rey's joke, except for Grigán, who was anxious to start up the lesson again. But he never had the chance; Yan and Corenn's arrival caused a new interruption. The Mother gathered the group around.

"I have something really important to say. It's good news."

"You're going to take Yan in Union!" Rey proposed.

"No. I am going to take him on as my apprentice."

"In what discipline?" Rey asked.

"Magic."

"Oh! All right." *She was joking.* Rey gave Bowbaq a thump on the shoulder and left the group to return to his pile of straw. The others didn't follow him.

"I was wondering about that, actually. The broken crossbow on the island; it was you!" Grigán said.

"Yes."

The giant asked, "Is it true? You're a magician?"

"Yes... well, that's a strong word. Let's just say I'm familiar with most of the principles and that I only use my power but rarely."

The heirs had seen so many strange things the past few days that they accepted the news fairly easily. Most Ramgriths didn't believe in magic, but Grigán had met several people with the talent throughout his travels. He had acknowledged the existence of magicians for a long time. The fact that Corenn was one of them and that she was teaching Yan was only a happy coincidence that could prove to be helpful.

For Bowbaq, magic was among those things that his people judged to be *impolite*. Different. Dangerous. They never doubted its existence, but they feared and respected the power as much as gods, demons, and sacred animals. However, the giant had been forced to change his convictions many times in the past few days. Maybe the Arques were also wrong about magic. If Corenn used it, it couldn't be that bad of a thing.

Rey was incredulous and joked, "Bowbaq reads minds; Corenn is a magician. I have an announcement for all of you. I have a great talent myself. I can touch my nose with my tongue."

"Do you think this is funny?" Grigán asked.

"Corenn," Rey continued, "I have met so many fakers that I will need to have proof. If you can do a demonstration, I promise I won't say anything more... at least until the end of the day."

The Mother gave him a small smile, took his hand, and placed a coin in his open palm. A moment later, the little metal disk floated in the air.

"I need to find myself a gag," Rey finally said, unflustered.

*My Will is awakening*, Corenn thought to herself. Her power had been sleeping for far too long, and even the slightest use had tired her enormously. However, the display for Rey was the third time in as many days that she had used it, and she already felt stronger. The magic was flowing through her more easily now, and she promised herself to put to practice the same advice she gave Yan. She would exercise her Will with him.

She had kept this secret for so long, for the good of the Matriarchy, that to finally reveal it provided her with a great sense of relief. The heirs were now more united than ever. They had all opened up to one another. Now they shared everything, and they always would.

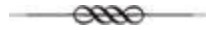
Yan had not spoken since Corenn's announcement, and Léti had been silent as well. They furtively glanced at each other, like two strangers who had just met.

Since everyone was waiting for the young woman's reaction, she forced herself to say something.

"I am happy for you, Yan. Very happy."

Her expression said the opposite. Léti had always known about her aunt's powers. She didn't have anything against magic, besides the fact that it always had to be kept secret and no one could talk about it. But Yan, whom she had reconnected with yesterday, was again going to change. He would begin to think differently. Evolve. He would *drift away from her*, little by little with each sunset. No, she wasn't happy that he was going to learn magic. Where had they gone, those happy days in Eza?

"Let's get back to work," she said to Grigán, closing the conversation. Her voice was strong, but she looked troubled. The heirs dispersed.



Despite his protests, Raji went to meet the man whom Corenn had spoken to. He was a Goranese merchant interested in peddling centenarian's liquor without having to pay Lorelien freight taxes. The two men came to an agreement, and the deal looked to be a good one for the little smuggler.

To the heirs' great surprise, Raji invited them to down a few goblets to celebrate the occasion. Even though his guests had caused him a lot of trouble, he also acknowledged the fact that he owed them something in return. Rey wasn't wrong about him. Raji was an honest man, albeit in his own way.

"Some brothers showed up at the Rominian Pig to question Bellec," he announced while they were gathered under the porch of his little farm. "The only reason he didn't say anything was to protect the tunnel. I thought I should warn you..."

"The Guild," Grigán muttered. "To be expected. They'll scour the whole city."

The smuggler didn't look worried. He lived several miles outside of Lorelia and never had had reason to worry, not about the Guild or about the royal tax collectors. The heirs were safe... for now.

"Raji, would you mind doing us a favor?" the warrior continued. "Could you find us a boat for the Small Kingdoms? For the seventh day of the next décade. Discreetly, of course."

The little man accepted without protest, as he was happy about his recent deal and even happier about his guests' imminent departure. Having done business with a few unscrupulous captains in the past, he knew of several leads.

The adventure was under way. The heirs hoped they had made the right decision.



The few days that stood between them and another meeting with the Züu flew by. Among other chores, the heirs took advantage of this forced rest to take inventory of their supplies and equipment.

Grigán, Corenn, Yan, and Léti had already pooled their savings. They decided to make it official and asked the others to join in, which Bowbaq and Rey did without hesitation. Their interests already being aligned, it was easier to combine their funds, and they could always redistribute the money in case of some unforeseen end to their friendship.

It went without saying that Corenn would be treasurer; it was obvious to everyone that she was the best equipped to handle the job. Her first action was to precisely count how much each person was contributing to their communal fund, preventing any future disagreements. The Mother declared that her own investment was a donation given to the *community of heirs*, and that she gave up any and all claims to the money. Since her savings were the largest, everyone welcomed her gesture and made the same promise. Rey was the last to make up his mind, still struggling to turn in his sense of individualism.

Once this awkward problem was resolved, the heirs worked on filling out their equipment. They had no idea where this adventure would take them, but what they had lived through up until now encouraged them to plan for anything. They took flasks, foodstuffs, sturdy bags, reinforced shoes, rope, blankets, lamps, and all sorts of tools. They traded Raji their horses for all the merchandise.

The group already had most of these necessities, but the stores were limited in number or in a damaged state. The smuggler's items were of the highest quality, coming from towns, provinces, or countries that specialized in making the goods. Each one was an artisan's masterpiece, solid and well

built. Grigán, himself, replaced a few pieces of his equipment with the wondrous products in the warehouse.

Rey spent a long time bartering with Raji, getting back at him for the exorbitant fee he had charged the heirs for their stay. He finally succeeded in obtaining a few advantageous concessions. The heirs picked up additional objects—an enormous mace that Grigán forced into Bowbaq’s hands, and a finely crafted Goranese broadsword for Léti. From then on, despite Corenn’s protests, they never saw the young woman without the cured leather scabbard swinging at her side.

All said and done, once the heirs paid for their entrance to the Small Palace, the advance for the boat that Raji had reserved for them, and the necessary cost for Grigán’s secret project, they just barely had enough money left to get to Junine. They would have to find some way to refill their purses. Corenn worried to herself. *As if we didn’t already have enough to worry about*, she thought.

They also took advantage of the short extra décade to train the apprentices. Grigán was content to practice a few exercises in various attacks, parries, and counterattacks, spending more time correcting Léti and Bowbaq’s errors than really teaching them anything. He wanted them to be familiar with their new weapons; the rest would come later.

Rey asked to watch Yan’s lessons, but the long moments of concentration bored him quickly, and he soon left to work with Grigán on a skill that he could actually use. Besides, it was more fun to mock the warrior than to disturb the overly serious Yan and Corenn.

In addition to being dull, the first courses in magic didn’t appear to be going too well. Yan avoided them for three days, pretending that he had a headache. He finally ceded to the Mother’s insistence that he continue and dedicated himself to the experience, which again ended in failure. He quit trying after he failed again the next day.

“Yan, what happened to you?” Corenn finally asked him. “It seems like you aren’t interested anymore. Do you still want to learn?” She had asked the question with all the tenderness she could, knowing that the slightest terse word could push Yan to make a reckless decision.

“I don’t know,” he responded. “I don’t know if it will ever be useful.”

The Mother announced the end of the lesson, and didn’t add anything else. They needed to discuss it some other time.

That night Corenn had a long conversation with her niece. Yan never knew exactly what they said, but Léti found him soon afterward, when he was alone, contemplating the stars. She sat next to him, and they stayed like that, no words passing between them, for a long time.

“I hope you are really applying yourself to your lessons,” she said abruptly. “I can’t wait for you to show me some of your tricks.”

The young man stared at her without bothering to hide his surprise. Léti was sincere.

“Your aunt yells a lot less than Grigán,” he told her, smiling. “And she never asks me to hit her.”

They laughed nervously, which seemed to ease the tension that had built up between them over the past few days. They spoke for a long time under the stars. They confessed their fears, their impressions, and their thoughts about the coming days, all the while avoiding talking about the feelings they had for each other. They pretended like they were in love. Like before, in Eza.

The next day, Yan succeeded brilliantly at his exercises. He learned everything that Corenn wanted to teach him. His education had begun once again, this time in earnest.

But Corenn didn’t have the chance to take advantage of her pupil’s newfound motivation. That day was the sixth of the décade. The Small Palace market was tomorrow.



The three bells striking the third deciday had just sounded when Taris the Green Ear finally spotted the party that the Züu were after. They were filing out of the dingy inn he was in charge of watching, the Rominian Pig. The brother could hardly believe it. The reward would be his!

He wedged himself into a dark corner and pretended to sleep, but kept an eye on the motley group. Four men and two women, among them a middle-aged Kaulienne and a mustached Ramgrith. There was no doubt that these were the ones he sought.

Taris wondered how he could have missed them. His watch hadn’t always been impeccable, sure, but it still seemed odd to him that he hadn’t seen any of the fugitives enter the inn. Doubly odd since they were loaded down like that with all of their luggage and traveling cookware. He would

keep this observation to himself, of course. Darlane didn't enjoy the unexplainable, and Taris the Green Ear wasn't going to be the one to provoke him. He would just stick to the facts: He had spotted the fugitives; he should receive the reward he deserved.

His instructions were to follow them until he had an opportunity to slip off and report them to Darlane. Taris judged the present moment to be opportune enough. Rumors were going around that the group consisted of a bunch of Züu hunters. If these guys were capable of doing in the red killers, he certainly wasn't about to cross swords with them alone.

It was through Taris that Darlane, the head of the Lorelien Guild, was notified less than a centiday later. Darlane went to the Small Palace to warn Zamerine himself, in hopes of winning over the favor, or at the very least the protection, of his zealous chief. The heirs weren't within sight of the building, and their enemies were already waiting for them.

The judge listened to Darlane's story with a distracted ear. It was a shame. He had almost hoped his adversaries would have made it more difficult.

"So it's all written," he declared. "These ignorant fugitives will have received Zuia's sentence before the apogee. Another page turned."

"But what if they get on a boat?" the head of the Guild allowed himself to point out. "According to my source, they're carrying luggage."

"We've known that for a long time already," Zamerine responded in a bored tone. "They're going to board the *Ambassador*, headed toward Lineh; their tickets were paid for six days ago, no questions asked. They don't have a chance," he repeated. "They either board the ship and die, or show up here and die."



Like the first time, the heirs had to divide into two groups. Grigán, Corenn, and Bowbaq would return to the Small Palace, while Yan, Rey, and Léti would wait for them at the boat... for departure as soon as the first group had finished their mission.

It was hard for them to leave each other. The same thoughts lingered in all their minds—perhaps this would be the end, perhaps they would never see each other again, perhaps one group would live while the others did not, perhaps this was the end for all of them. Grigán cut the moment short,

which was turning from a “see you soon” into a series of long-winded good-byes. He pulled Corenn and Bowbaq after him, leaving the youngest members of the group and their share of baggage behind.

“I hope they don’t do anything stupid,” the warrior mumbled to himself. “They talk like they are better than hardened mercenaries, but they are as naïve as babies.”

Corenn smiled at his remark. Underneath his surly complaints, Grigán was full of care and thoughtfulness. He proved it more every day.

“And if you adopted one of them?” she suggested.

“What?”

“Yan is an orphan, you know. And Léti is as well, in a certain manner. After all, I am not really her aunt.”

“Reyan too,” Bowbaq added innocently.

“Well, now I’ve heard it all. To adopt the one we have all seen act so pretentious, so cynical, and who has no respect for anyone! I would prefer to kiss Zuia.”

The warrior could only respond this way. The Mother understood him too well, and he was happy and irritated at the same time. The idea had already crossed his mind to start a family with Corenn and Léti... but he forbid himself from thinking about it. Those things weren’t for him. He didn’t have the right.

Unexpectedly, he noticed that Bowbaq was breathing heavily, almost suffocating as they crossed the market in Riders’ Square.

“Bowbaq? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” the giant responded, who, on the contrary, grew more and more pale. “It’s all these people. There are so many. No, I don’t feel very well, to be honest.”

“We are almost there,” Corenn said, grabbing his arm. “You can still...”

“Yes. Yes. It will be fine.”

Bowbaq cursed himself. For the first time he could be useful to the group, truly useful. Now wasn’t the time to be weak.

“You are scared of crowds,” Corenn remarked. “It’s all right. It will pass, but you should have told me.”

“I didn’t think there would be *so many people*,” the giant apologized, breathing hard. “It makes me feel *dirty*.”

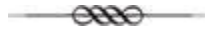
“It’s no problem,” Grigán repeated to calm the giant. “We’re here.”



They waited a few moments in front of the palace, enough time for Bowbaq to gather himself. Luckily, he didn't take long. The giant was already getting used to the nuisance of a crowd.

"Let's go," he decided, even though the color was just starting to return to his face. "I am going to help us. I am going to do it."

They entered the raised porch covering the entrance to the Small Palace. The jelenis cleared out of the way and let them pass, and then let out their dogs' chains, thus preventing anyone from entering... or leaving.



"We should have bought Raji's donkey," Rey managed to say, gasping for air under the weight of his double load. "That would have made this forced march... a... walk in the park."

"Oh yeah, explaining the presence of a donkey in an inn, that would have been no trouble at all," Yan mocked, still joking despite his fatigue.

"Hey, how about it, Mr. Magician, couldn't you just make us all fly to the harbor?"

"I really wish that were possible."

"Just me, then! I'll wait for you there, I promise," Rey said.

It was best not to respond. In an exchange of jokes, Rey always had the last word.

"Anyway, it shouldn't be much farther, right?" Léti asked.

"Three streets past the one that goes downhill. Follow me!"

Yan and Léti followed Rey as he disappeared down a dark and narrow alley that looked exactly like the dozen others they'd already taken. As he saw it, there were lots of advantages to taking them through the narrowest streets. They took the shortest way possible, they had fewer chances of being spotted, and it also allowed him to show off his knowledge of the huge Lorelien city. But this alley was one too many.

A low door opened just behind Yan, and two men emerged, armed with dirks. Two more immediately appeared farther down the alley, blocking the only exit.

Léti felt her anger boil as Yan pushed her toward the center of the alley. He set down his pack and took a determined position between the young woman and the attackers.

Rey hadn't moved an inch. He was staring at the two men standing in front of him with a grave look on his face.

*We didn't plan for this*, thought Léti. They had envisioned plenty of other situations, for which Grigán had found just as many solutions, but this was unexpected.

"What do you want?" Yan asked, trying to keep a neutral tone. He wanted to avoid this confrontation at all costs.

"Ain't tha' a question, wha' do we want?" one of the thieves piped up. "This here's our stree'. You gotta pay the toll on ye' goods."

Léti drew her broadsword, realizing that Yan wasn't even armed. For his part, Rey seemed overwhelmed by everything that was happening; he stood still, as if frozen by fear. They were going to lose this fight for sure...

"How much is the toll?" Yan asked, walking within reach of the hustlers.

"All the goods," another one answered, setting off a roar of laughter from his gang.

Suddenly, Rey burst into a madman's howl. A real howl. He threw his pack on the ground, gripped his rapier, and ran straight for the men, his eyes wild, and his tongue sticking out of his wide-open mouth.

The two would-be thieves took a step back, and then another step, each of them trying to position himself behind the other. Rey was no more than a few yards from them now with no sign of slowing his charge. They turned their backs and fled.

The actor chased after them and was soon out of view, although his companions could still hear his yelling. The two remaining crooks searched each other's expressions, unsure of what to do.

"He's coming back, you know," Yan warned, pointing to the other end of the alley.

The two men didn't have to hear it twice. They spun on their heels and ran off. When it was four against three, it was worth it, but two against a dangerous madman, and they lost interest.

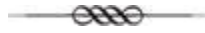
Rey reappeared shortly after with a big smile on his face. Yan and Léti had already gathered up most of their packs.

"What did you do with them?" Yan asked as they broke into a run for the harbor.

"I let them go, of course. But I did wreck a stall to stay in character. It would be best if we didn't hang around here."

It wasn't hard for Yan to imagine Rey in a rage, yelling and kicking crates of vegetables in the air. If only all of their problems could be solved like that, life would be much easier, but that wasn't the case.

They still had no idea what was waiting for them at the harbor.



Grigán was an experienced traveler, to put it mildly. He adapted to almost any place and felt at home wherever he was. This was only his third visit to the Small Palace, but the marble walls, enormous staircases, and the ceilings decorated with paintings already seemed all too familiar to him.

It was different for Corenn, whose analytical mind took an interest in everything, even when observing something for the hundredth time. Being inside one of the most prestigious buildings in the Lorelien capital provided plenty for her insatiable mind to ponder over.

For Bowbaq, it was different still. The giant stood wide-eyed in front of the building's massive dimensions; the palace was so large he had a hard time believing it was built by human hands. For a moment, he wondered whether it would be *impolite* to trudge his feet across the entryway's immaculate floor. But seeing no hesitation from Grigán and Corenn, he followed after them, still trying to be as light-footed as possible. It was a futile measure, and his large size drew looks from all the jelenis... and their dogs.

The fact that the Loreliens allowed dogs inside such a beautiful building seemed equally *impolite*. Even though he had a profound respect for animals, he would have never considered letting Mir into his log cabin, let alone something as magnificent as this palace!

The drudge clerk at the registry must have recognized them because he was surprisingly efficient with the admission process. So efficient, in fact, that they were granted entry before the jelenis had confiscated their weapons. Like the first time, Grigán handed over the broadsword he wore at his waist.

"What do you need to keep the sheath for?" the skeptical Lorelien asked.

"It's a collector's item," the warrior responded. "It cost me a fortune. I have no desire to see someone else reclaim it 'by accident.'"

The guard nodded and let them through. It was very common for visitors of the palace to showcase their wealth.

“Well, here we are,” Corenn announced as they walked through the park.

She immediately began a search for the Züu, while Grigán took a count of the archers and jelenis patrolling above, as he had done the first time. Bowbaq observed the perfectly arranged plants with mixed feelings. In here, nature was treated like a slave. The result was beautiful, sure; however, he couldn’t decide whether such a practice was acceptable, again turning over the word *impolite* in his mind.

A plump man with shifty eyes approached them cautiously. Corenn was prepared to refuse a business offer, but it wasn’t what the man had in mind.

“Umm... the priests are waiting for you,” he announced without introducing himself. “Over there, behind that clump of trees.”

The man walked away without taking his eyes off them, and Grigán showed him the same distrust until he had left the garden. Whoever this man was, he feared the heirs. Or at least he didn’t want to get mixed up in what was in store for them...

Corenn obediently walked over to where the man had pointed, with Bowbaq following right behind. The giant’s heart was beating so hard he was certain that everyone could hear it.

Grigán caught up to them and advanced to the front of the line, his hand resting on his sword’s sheath, a reflex from a life on the run. *The Züu weren’t naïve in choosing their spot*, he noticed as they got closer. The trees completely sectioned off the view from one side. They were also right near the portico, which meant that by following the jelenis’ regular patrolling cadence, there would be brief, predictable periods when the garden was completely free from surveillance.

The warrior circled around the little grove without the slightest hesitation, proving his courage and resolve. He didn’t fear them. He only feared what they could do to his friends.

“You’ve come with reinforcements,” the older Zü pointed out as he sat comfortably on a stone seat, his eyes resting on Bowbaq. His statement was meant to be a joke.

“You too,” Grigán shot back, nodding toward the killer’s two accomplices.

One was the same hooded figure who led their first meeting a décade before. He didn't address them in the slightest, not even a head nod; his eyes stared forward, his jaw tense, and his hands crossed behind his back. His counterparts did the same.

Grigán wondered what they could be hiding behind their backs. The fact that they stood right behind their master didn't reassure him either.

"You are Corenn of Kaul, aren't you?" asked the Zü. "And Grigán Derkel of Griteh, and of course Bowbaq from the Bird clan. Where are the others?"

"I'm sure you'll excuse me for not answering that," Corenn responded, taking a seat across from him. "To whom do I owe the honor?"

"Judge Zamerine. Spiritual leader of the Lorelien messengers. Of which there are increasingly few, thanks to you," he added.

Bowbaq had trouble believing it. This man was publically admitting he was a Zü! Not that he seemed too worried about giving it away, donning his red tunic and shaved head in the heart of Lorelia. The prevailing morals in most of the Upper Kingdoms were truly strange.

"It's not our wish to kill your followers," Corenn reminded him. "You know well. All of us here only have one thing in mind, and that's to end this conflict."

"That's impossible. My subordinate has already told you. Even if you hadn't done harm to the messengers, the sentence would still stand. It's all the more true now that it's a personal matter."

"We would make a generous offering to the cult if you delayed our sentence. That's the reason for this second meeting."

"The Goddess is not just some magistrate who is slave to human laws. This mercy in disguise for which you are pleading is, of course, refused. Such is Zuïa's judgment."

Corenn hadn't expected a victory, but she was disappointed with the swiftness of the result. Grigán stood restlessly by her side. The warrior signaled to her to back away from the killers. Once Bowbaq intervened, the meeting would likely break into a fight, and even the Lorelien guards' precautions wouldn't stop the Züu from attacking.

The Mother rehashed her arguments in her mind, but she found that they no longer had many options left in the face of Zamerine's blatantly hostile display. She had to give Bowbaq the signal and leave the rest up to fate.

She held out a parchment to the Zü, who accepted it with revulsion.

“I persist in thinking that we can find grounds for compromise. Perhaps you could deliver this letter to... our *enemy*.”

The Zü unfolded the letter brashly. The parchment was blank. And then... *Someone was infiltrating his mind! Bowbaq, the giant. He was rummaging through his memories, digging around, searching, studying everything Zamerine knew about the Accuser.*

“Kill them!” he ordered to his men, closing his mind to this infuriating intrusion.

The two Züu stepped toward them with their hands in the air, empty after all. One jumped at Corenn, and the other at Grigán. The Mother’s adversary bared her a strange smile. A cold grin of *steel*.

The killers were equipped with razor-sharp metal jaws, which were surely poisoned. The Zü knocked Corenn onto her back and leaned his mouth toward her neck. The monstrous teeth were long and sharp, and Corenn couldn’t figure out how he had managed to keep them in his closed mouth. She noted this to herself subconsciously, as all of her energy was focused on keeping the Zü from biting her. The man was relentless, though, attacking her like a wolf would an injured prey, searching for any opportune inch of flesh Corenn might leave within his reach.

The weight of the killer’s body suddenly lightened. Something lifted him. The Zü stuck his useless tongue through the silver glint of teeth, unable to produce anything but groans, which further accentuated his resemblance to an animal.

Bowbaq. Bowbaq had just lifted the Zü with one hand by his neck, as he would have a cat.

The giant balled up his other hand and swung it right at his enemy’s face. The northerner was neither nice nor philosophical, his face flush with rage. He was angry. Very angry.

Grigán had knocked his enemy back with a kick right to the chest. Then his hand moved to his sheath. The Zü charged back only to impale himself on a thin blade a foot and a half long that the warrior had drawn from a secret inner sheath.

It had all happened very quickly. Grigán’s victim collapsed to the ground while the remaining Zü fell from Bowbaq’s grip. The assassin flailed on the ground as he tried to halt the blood gushing from his nose.

The guards would soon be on top of them. It was the first time a fight to the death had taken place within the palace walls, and intervention was inevitable. Grigán already heard the running feet of the archers in the balcony overhead, shuffling as they tried to find a shooting angle clear of the obstructive trees. The archers had no concerns about who started the fight; their orders were to pin down anyone who got mixed up in a skirmish. Though if it were possible, they might spare the Züu and avoid ending up on the fanatics' blacklist in doing so.

The jelenis ran toward them, struggling to hold back their dogs. They couldn't risk the dogs harming anyone but those who were guilty. This was an advantage the heirs could exploit.

Bowbaq reached out to the first dog's mind even before his master came into view. His message was clear: *danger*. The animal mind's most powerful concept.

As planned, the dog reacted violently to the intrusion and felt an immediate, unrestrained rage toward the giant. But the word *danger* was too strong, the giant's command too gripping, to be ignored. Now, the dog only wanted one thing: to flee, flee far from the human *danger*. The animal broke free of the jeleni's control, the guard's attempts to corral it with his leash failing. The guard fell to the ground, and the dog dragged him, adding to the panic.

At the same time, Corenn had gotten back on her feet. She checked to make sure that Grigán was holding off the two remaining Züu with his dagger, and began looking for the archers. They were the weak link in their plan. If the heirs couldn't get them on their side, everything would be a waste.

The Mother set her sights on one of them who was now close enough to shoot. She gestured wildly at him to show that she was unarmed and that they weren't looking to resist. The man ignored her and nocked an arrow.

Corenn sent her Will faster than she thought possible. The bowstring snapped with a sharp ping and whipped the eager guard in the face. Fatigue overcame her, and she stumbled after Grigán and Bowbaq, both of whom had started to run away.

The warrior didn't take his eyes off the red killers even though they made no move to follow. The man with the wounded nose had taken out his steel jaws and waited for his master's orders. The Judge Zamerine watched

them flee with a smile on his face. The Züu defeat was seemingly inconsequential to him.

*Zamerine must have another plan*, Grigán thought. The warrior hoped he hadn't made an error in his own planning. In an instant, he thought of the boat where Yan and Léti were supposed to wait for them.

Bowbaq reached into the mind of every dog that came into sight, incapacitating the jelenis. The Small Palace's garden transformed into a noisy courtyard as yelps, commands, and the scandalized yells of traders filled the air.

Running from bush to bush, the heirs made it to the exit—which was already congested—without any further attacks from the archers. None of them dared shoot a single arrow with all the ensuing panic, as the margin for error was too large.

Bowbaq cleared the crowd by agitating the minds of two dogs by the door. Their bloodcurdling howls sent people running. The heirs entered into the now-empty hallway and rushed for the door.

"You can't leave right now." A jeleni stopped them. His dog's mind was still calm.

Grigán didn't wait for the giant's intervention and violently shoved the surprised guard, who fell over backward on his dog. From over their fleeing shoulders the heirs heard the dog take vengeance on its clumsy master.

A moment later, they were outside. A small crowd had formed at the front door, all curious as to what was causing the raucous inside, which was still largely drowned out by the outdoor market's own clamor. They all dispersed at the sight of Grigán's dagger, except for a man who joined them.

"You took a while," Rey protested, playing it cool. "Any longer and I would have been forced to come to your aid."

"Is everything all right?" Corenn asked, worried.

"Everything's fine. The Züu are definitely waiting for us in the *Ambassador's* hold, but we'll be embarking on the *Othenor*, which the community of heirs just purchased for a decent price through a connection of yours truly."

"Let's not waste time. It won't take long for them to realize they've been duped."

"Just a moment." To his companions' great surprise, Rey went inside the palace. Grigán held the curious onlookers at bay, cursing the actor's caprice under his breath.



Corenn decided to take advantage of this brief pause to assuage her curiosity. “Bowbaq, do you know our enemy’s name?”

The giant shook his head. He was visibly disappointed.

“Not even the Züu know who he is,” he stated. “They just call him the Accuser.”

Corenn acknowledged with a frown, and decided to delay further questioning of Bowbaq about any other information he was able to obtain. *Too bad*, she thought. *We can at least say we tried.*

Shouts and protests, followed by a demonic wailing, came to them from inside the palace. Grigán cursed and readied himself to go back inside, but before he could make his move, Rey came bursting out unharmed. He was struggling to carry the scribe’s heavy treasure chest. All the traders’ entry fees. Hundreds of golden terces.

“Restitution,” he explained. “For all the wealth confiscated unjustly from my ancestor.”

No one could find anything to say. The heirs were alone. They only had each other to count on. Just as it had been for 118 years.

## BOOK IV: DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

The *Othenor* was a fishing sloop designed for a nine-passenger crew, so the six members of the group had plenty of space. It was also a ship designed for two- or three-day expeditions at most. The architect and the shipowner made little effort to consider passenger comfort, and for their part, the heirs envisioned a voyage of almost a décade.

The ship had only two cabins: the captain's quarters, which the men courteously left to Léti and Corenn, and the crew's quarters, which was furnished with nothing but eight filthy hammocks. A tiny room hiding a bucket acted as the lavatory, and another room that adjoined the cabins filled the roles of dining room, living room, and kitchen all at once.

The hold was reserved for the former owner's nets and baskets. For the most part it remained empty and would have stored the catch on any usual outing. Lining the hold were barrels of freshwater, salted meats, and a stock of spirits, whose quality Rey tested for the entirety of their crossing. A number of chests fastened to the lower deck held tackle and spare sails.

The heirs bought the vessel through one of Rey's connections the very day they embarked. The decision was risky, and the possibility of failure high. Lorelia was one of the known-world's largest harbors though, and Rey was offering to pay in full and on the spot. The heirs eventually stumbled across four vessels that met their criteria and, following Yan's advice, decided to put their money on the *Othenor*.

They had made a quick exit from the harbor. The customs officials and royal tax collectors paid little interest to boats exiting the port, and cared much more about the merchant ships over the fishing boats. The *Othenor* and its passengers sailed past the last Zélanos lighthouse without any trouble in sight.

While the ship may have required a nine-member crew for a fishing outing, it needed far less manpower to navigate and trim the single mast's sails. Having spent time at sea since childhood, Yan and Léti were savvy enough to sail respectably. Rey tried to lend a helping hand on deck at times, although he couldn't hide how much he hated it. The others did their best to make themselves useful, at least until they had sailed far enough away from the coast to relax.

It wasn't until the high spires of Lorelien castles had fallen away from the horizon that the heirs took the time to recount their stories, and they shuddered at the telling. Even after the fact, realizing what great perils they had escaped, a long, cold silence settled over the group. They sympathized with Bowbaq when he shared his disappointment for failing to read the name of the Accuser in the Zü's mind. Rey counted up all the treasure he had stolen from the Small Palace, an impressive sum that raised eyebrows.

"We're pirates now!" he announced cheerfully, genuine excitement in his voice.

Bowbaq was sick the entire first day, while Grigán played the part of a watchful pirate. The warrior was afraid that either the Züu or the Lorelien fleet would chase them down, but they had fled from the city so quickly, it would take some time for their pursuers to get wise and give chase.

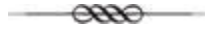
Rey took the first free moment to systematically rummage through every one of the ship's stores, anxious to take an exact inventory of what they had acquired with the boat. He didn't find much, and from then on he grew restless and bored. The actor was going to find their time at sea very long.

Léti and Corenn dramatically improved the comfort of their living quarters. They almost got rid of the fishy odor that clung to every inch of the cabin down to the smallest crack. *Almost*. They would have to put up with the remaining stench for several days.

At first the heirs sailed due south, their only objective being to escape Lorelia as quickly as possible. Once they reached the open ocean, Yan turned the helm and pointed the ship on an east-south-east direction heading toward Galen, the northernmost city of the Baronies, located on the mouth of the Ubese River. The plan was to sail up the calm river right to Junine.

Danger would soon catch up with them again, and they would have to improvise, perhaps even fight... but for now they only thought of how

lucky they were to have made it out of so many perilous situations alive... and they tried to appreciate the respite they had before more perils to come.



“I can’t speak for the other Züu,” Bowbaq announced as they reviewed the events that had transpired in the Small Palace. “But Zamerine, their chief, doesn’t know anything. They simply call our enemy: the Accuser.”

The heirs had met up in the common room for their first meal aboard the *Othenor*. It was their first night on the boat, and the pitching of the ship on the sea made their stomachs turn—a feeling that would fade eventually, but not soon enough for some. It wasn’t the first time they had been through something new. And it wouldn’t be the last; they just had to be patient.

“I think they call all their clients that, unfortunately,” Rey informed them. “Which doesn’t help us much!”

“Did you not see anything else? Maybe the Zü was thinking of a *Lorelien*, for example. The Accuser could be Lorelien then. Something like that?”

The giant thought about Corenn’s question. He tried to reorganize thoughts that weren’t his own, that he had seen only for a brief flash, and the complexities that were expressed in a language he did not speak.

“Well, maybe... I remember he had an image in his head. Of a face. The Accuser’s, surely.”

They let Bowbaq concentrate, keeping quiet despite the dozens of questions they were burning to ask. If the description turned out to be detailed enough, Corenn or Grigán could figure out which heir it was. They were still convinced he was one of them. He seemed to know too much about them not to be an heir himself.

Bowbaq opened his eyes and came out of his reverie. “I don’t know if... if Zamerine actually saw him, or if it is just how he imagines him. I think he met him, because the image had some details that were more precise than the setting in a dream. He definitely had spoken to him, but the...” He trailed off to silence.

Rey, feigning anger, interrupted him, “You’re going to tell us, right, *what he looked like?*”

The actor was joking, but his impatience was genuine enough, as it was for his companions.

“Right! Sorry. But it’s not that interesting, you know. He thought about someone whose face was covered by a... a sort of mask. You know, some sort of cauldron over his head...”

“A helmet,” Grigán responded, disappointment in his voice. “You didn’t see his face at all.”

“Uhh, no. I would have told you right away.”

The heirs let this new disillusionment sink in. While good fortune had been on their side enough to keep them alive, their overall quest seemed to have no lucky star.

The giant made an effort to find any other interesting information, but the more he tried to concentrate, the more he struggled to differentiate between the scraps of this fleeting image and products of his own imagination. He knew that in a few days it would all be gone, the memories of fact swirling with his imagined visions, until there was no truth to be found in any of it. Anything he had to say, he had to say it now.

“It’s a man; I am sure of that,” he told the group, keeping his eyes closed. “Zamerine remembers him walking and waving his arms around. He’s in good health, I mean, he has all his limbs at least.”

“But that’s me!” Rey cried in horror, his joke meeting a wall of silence.

Corenn asked, “How was he dressed?”

“He was wearing some kind of metal tunic. Like Grigán’s, but thicker. He wears it under a toga.”

“A chain-mail coat! Where is there a war going on right now?”

“In the Lower Kingdoms,” Grigán responded with a sigh. “And in the Romine provinces. And in Jezeba. And maybe in the Warrior’s Valley. He could be a soldier or mercenary, as much as he might just be a cautious merchant.”

Corenn continued, still hopeful, “Describe the helmet.”

Bowbaq concentrated again. They were asking him for precise details of an image he had caught only a glimpse of—an image that he hadn’t studied very well because he was focusing mainly on catching a name.

“I think... there is a band tied around the top. Fairly broad and black. Then, there are only two slits for the eyes, and little holes in front of the mouth and ears. That’s all. It’s all one piece. Like a cauldron; I was right.”

The mother turned to Grigán to hear his take.

Without hesitation, the warrior said, “A Goranese helmet. But that doesn’t mean anything. You could just as easily find one in Lorelia, for example. The band is meant to indicate the wearer’s coat of arms, but to my knowledge, there is no family that wears black on their heraldry.”

“Actually, it’s forbidden,” Rey added confidently. “I had the mind-numbing privilege of studying heraldry. Over the years, black has become a defining characteristic for the coats of arms of the emperor’s enemies. Banished people, rebels, and conspirators...”

“How many of our suspects are Goranese?”

Corenn consulted her morbid list that she had made. If there were no errors or omissions, only twenty-two heirs still had an unknown end, out of seventy-one that the Mother had counted in the last generation.

She shared her result only after checking it over twice.

“None. All the Goranese on my list were killed by the Züu.”

Grigán let out a curse. Their quest to know the Accuser hadn’t progressed an inch, while their enemy seemed to possess unlimited resources. If they didn’t learn something in Junine, they might have to give up. Burrow into an unknown hole somewhere, hoping to escape the Züu for as long as possible before the inevitable day when they would be brutally woken from their sleep.



Since keeping the *Othenor* on course required little work on Yan’s part, he had the luxury to focus his energy on learning magic. For him, it wasn’t just a way to pass the time, like Bowbaq and Rey’s fishing operation that had been under way since the second day. No, he had rediscovered his passion, helped by Léti’s encouragement.

Corenn shared Yan’s attitude. She could sense her own progress, but that wasn’t her primary motivation. Yan’s Will seemed so powerful, the strongest she had ever encountered. She was curious to see what he could do once he had properly learned to use it.

But things had been done out of order. Yan demonstrated his power before he proved his patience. It was the Mother’s job to fix that. Now, he needed to work on them both.

They secluded themselves in the so-called captain’s cabin, not to keep their activities secret, there was no reason for that anymore, but to be away

from distraction and to keep focused. Their companions understood, and an inquiring knock never fell upon their door. At the sight of the closed door, Grigán jumped at the opportunity to give Léti her own lessons. Corenn merely tolerated these lessons. Grigán knew good and well that she didn't like them, so he did what he could to train the girl while they were out of sight from her aunt.

"Where do we start?" Yan asked his teacher as soon as they had settled into the cabin.

"Do you have any questions?"

"Tons. So many that I don't know which to ask first..."

"I hope I can answer each one of them truthfully. After all, I could unconsciously be spreading a pack of lies by sharing what I know. Magic is mysterious, even for magicians."

"Do you mean to say that what you're going to teach me might be wrong?"

Yan's tone wasn't aggressive, but he also couldn't hide his surprise. Corenn pondered the basic principle of all teaching: *I don't necessarily have the truth. Question what I teach you. Think, and you'll have learned.*

"The... techniques, if that's what you can call the use of Will, work perfectly well. But the explanations that go along with them are merely interpretations accepted by most, or entirely personal. There's nothing to prove they're right."

The young man understood, letting the meaning of her words simmer. Over the course of all his apprenticeships, masters never put their own knowledge in question.

*You're having doubts, Yan. Your apprenticeship has just begun,* Corenn thought, amused.

"I have my first question," he announced, furrowing his brow. "You told me that only a small number of people have the power. But then you claimed the opposite when I said that I had succeeded. Which should I believe?"

"As a matter of fact, that's a delicate subject. Perhaps the most controversial, actually. The origin of magic? The quality of magicians? Some claim to be part of a small group of chosen ones, and that only they are able to call on Will. Among those, there are some who explain the source of their power is a reward for their faith in a particular cult. *My* theory is that we all carry this strength inside ourselves, but it's only

revealed if circumstances demand it. And even then, you need to have the required patience, and... intelligence, you could say, to learn how to control it and put it to use.”

“If that’s your theory, then why did you claim the opposite at first?”

“Because if I had told you that anyone can do it, you just need to try hard enough, you wouldn’t have really tried. And you would have ended up giving up, getting upset with me, upset with yourself, and upset with everyone for your failure. Trust me, I know from experience.”

Yan nodded, smiling. Corenn was right. It was easy for him to imagine how others would have reacted that way.

“To finish answering your question, there’s a third possibility: The power might be hereditary to some degree. But in a way so anarchic that you couldn’t properly call it a rule... my own grandmother, the daughter of the emissaries Yon and Tiramis, was a magician. My aunt, the Mother of Norme, was also one. But neither my cousin nor Lėti have shown the slightest disposition.”

“To my knowledge, none of my ancestors were magicians. There’s not much to support that theory, unless there’s some rather complex rule.”

“We agree, then. Welcome to the great circle of polemicists!”

“Do you know a lot of other magicians?”

“I know three. Two Kauliennes, who apprenticed under me, and an old friend from Crek whom I correspond with rather regularly. Unfortunately, you can’t go about parading this kind of ability, as you’ll find for yourself. So it’s difficult to establish friendships with other magicians...”

Yan agreed, though he had already decided to keep it a secret. He was already strange enough in others’ eyes, and he wasn’t going to openly display a power that the superstitions of the weak-minded wouldn’t hesitate to deem dangerous.

“Shall we start the lesson?” Yan asked impatiently.

“It has already started, young man. We’re not going to spend the whole time moving shells around. Before you learn how to use your Will, you need to get to know it. Respect it. And believe me, it’s more a question of *safety* than it is philosophy.”





Grigán had also decided to move on to more serious lessons with Léti. If her first sessions had been meant to discourage her, the next few were to give the warrior a chance to judge her weaknesses, and find ways to fix them. Now he was sure enough about his student and about himself to really start teaching her.

Léti was waiting for his instruction, standing on the sloop's deck, which rocked according to the whims of the waves and was kissed by the sun's rays. They were only two days away from the Upper Kingdoms, but the sun was already more mild in these waters than in Lorelia with the oncoming cold Season of the Earth.

The young woman waited and tried a variety of tricks with her broadsword. She was the only one who carried a weapon on board. Grigán himself didn't give a thought to his curved blade until night fell, as he was unable to sleep without a weapon within reach. Léti kept the heavy sheath at her side at all times, and it scraped her thigh day and night.

She had ripped up her Kaulienne work tunic, which, after three dékades of travel, was torn up and dirty beyond recognition, to fashion a pair of shorts and a loose short-sleeved shirt. Such an outfit would have earned disapproving looks in Kaul, but gave the young woman more freedom to move, which was needed as she trained. Grigán was happy that she had taken the initiative for these improvements without him having to say a word, but he still had more advice to give her...

"Your hair, Léti. Tie it up anytime there might be a fight. It's too easy to grab."

She ran her hand through her long brown hair, which fell in gentle cascades down her neck, and then hastily gathered it into a ponytail, which she wrapped around itself and fastened with the help of a bandana. It wasn't the most charming hairstyle, but the warrior understood and admired its advantages.

"Starting today, all our exercises will illustrate one of these three rules: steady hand, firm footing, sharp mind."

Léti nodded her head. When the warrior was teaching her something, she stayed silent, drinking in his words and saving her strength for the physical training. And though it was very respectful of her, Grigán couldn't help but expect some kind of reaction from her. He had struggled to formulate these three rules, and would have liked it if she had shown some more interest in them.

“Every mistake you make can be explained by forgetting one of these rules. If you lose a fight, it’s not because your adversary is better than you: It’s because he was better *at that moment*. That he had a steadier hand, firmer footing, a sharper mind. You should work to eliminate your weaknesses, and learn to see those of others.”

Léti nodded again with a serious look on her face. Grigán couldn’t understand how she could stay like that, with no reaction. He had failed to consider that the student was stoic as a reflection of her instructor. Grigán’s lesson was clear, and the young woman had, up to that point, no questions to ask.

“Demonstration,” decided the warrior, who was more at ease in practice than in theory. “Defend yourself.”

A bit surprised, Léti obeyed. It was the first time that they were both armed during an exercise. She considered the risk of an accidental injury, but forced the idea from her head as she remembered her first lesson. Grigán knew what he was doing.

She assumed a combat stance, somewhat clumsily, copying the master-at-arms’ posture. The position suited a warrior using a four-foot curved blade perfectly but didn’t suit one with a short Goranese broadsword. Grigán simply extended his arm and hit Léti’s blade with his scimitar. In the instant it took her to recover, the warrior took a step forward and held the point of his blade an inch from his student’s throat.

“Steady hand,” he repeated in a grave voice.

He got back into position, followed by Léti, who instinctively adjusted her stance. He launched a similar attack, but the young woman kept him at bay and kept up her guard without flinching. Grigán accelerated his attack, alternating an assault at her legs with another aimed at her head. Léti did her best to parry, even though she had never learned how to do so properly. Each time he attacked, she recoiled a small step unconsciously, until the warrior surprised her by delivering two consecutive attacks to her legs. By reflex, she jumped back but couldn’t regain her balance and fell. Grigán once again menaced her throat with his blade.

“Firm footing.”

“And sharp mind; I get it,” she said, frustrated. “Could we move on to the lesson?”

“Didn’t you learn anything from this?”

The young woman stood, her face unreadable. She shot a look at Bowbaq and Rey, who were fishing on the other end of the deck. The two men were hardly interested in the two combatants at the moment. It was better that way. No one had seen her fail so dismally.

“You won’t get me a third time,” she promised the warrior in a defiant tone.

“A fight is never won in advance, Léti. Not for me; not for you. If you do hold me off, I’ll be the first to congratulate you, but I doubt you could ever manage to best me. Or anyone,” he said in a scornful tone, to Léti’s great surprise.

Silent, they squared off again. Léti had never been so humiliated. Since Grigán stayed motionless, she instinctively attacked first, without having the least idea of what she was doing.

The warrior was waiting for it. He caught her arm before it reached its target, and once again pointed the tip of his blade at her throat.

“Sharp mind,” he said, smiling. “Your mind’s heavy with rage.”

“You deliberately provoked me! That’s... you should be ashamed! That’s cheating!”

“All right, so it’s not very honorable, but it’s not cheating. In a combat, a single rule counts: The one who is the least injured wins. I am here to teach you to defend yourself, not to teach you fancy fencing techniques.”

Léti massaged her wrist, thinking about the warrior’s words. He still had a steady hand; that was for sure. He also had a funny way of teaching his students! But underneath it all, he was right.

“All right, all right. You won three times. So what do we do now?”

“We’ll get started... from the beginning, of course. Take your weapon. Stay standing. In a fight, we are as vulnerable as newborn babes. So for a start, I’m going to teach you how to walk.”



Rey dug up an old stringed moon with two strings missing while rummaging through the sloop’s bow holds. To trick himself out of his boredom, he made restoring it a personal project, and was proud to present his masterpiece to the group on their third morning at sea.

The fishing lines distinctly didn't sound as true as traditional strings, but they weren't so out of tune that they discouraged Rey from launching into a recital of bawdy songs, to Yan and Léti's great amusement.

Impressed by her friend's talent, Léti suggested, "Maybe you should compose a ballad about the wise ones of Ji."

The actor's face grew grim as he answered, "I've already considered it... but I don't like sad songs." He still only saw the negative aspects, the "curse," surrounding their ancestors' experience; how most of them were deprived of their land, titles, and positions. What secret deserved such a sacrifice?

"There's a ship off our bow," Bowbaq announced suddenly.

His companions rushed to join him at the front of the boat. Sure enough, there was a ship, a small dot on the cerulean horizon of the Median Sea. From this distance they couldn't distinguish much else.

"It's from the Small Kingdoms," Grigán pointed out, "which isn't much to worry about. I would be a lot more concerned if we saw one in our wake."

"I thought the coastline between Lineh and Galen was a haven for pirates," Rey commented.

The heirs exchanged worried looks. Everyone had heard that rumor at least once before, and a sinking feeling came over the group. The whispered rumors seemed to speak clearly now as truth.

"We are far from Lineh," Corenn decided. "It must be a merchant vessel."

The rest of the day crawled by. The heirs traded watches, observing the approaching ship. It was clear that they would pass one another soon. Everyone silently hoped that it would be an encounter without incident.

As the boat closed in, they were eventually able to make out a Junian frigate. It was a good sign, since the Barony was renowned for its pacifism, but it didn't mean they were in the clear.

"Should we try to avoid them?" Bowbaq wondered aloud.

"That would be pointless; they're a lot faster than us. They could easily catch us if they wanted to. And if they turn out to be harmless and don't know who we are, we will have lost an excellent opportunity to gain some information," Corenn offered.

Bowbaq appreciated Corenn's sound argument. They were forced to leave Lorelia in such a rush that they didn't even know if Queen Séhane,

who had been the main purpose of their voyage, was still alive. It was a vital question whose answer they needed as soon as possible.

As they approached, they could see that the Junians were going to sail past without incident. The heirs took the initiative and signaled to the merchant ship, whose hull towered a whole two yards taller than theirs.

The Junian crew signaled back and bustled around the deck to slow their course and drift up to the sloop. They tossed a mooring line to keep the two ships abreast.

“Are you doing all right?” a tan-skinned, portly man asked, leaning over the open water. He had addressed them in Lorelien.

Grigán replied in perfect Junian to make the conversation more familiar and friendly. “A rat thought it was a good idea to make its grave in our freshwater barrel. If you have a barrel or two to spare, we’re happy to buy it... we’re sick of drinking liquor,” he concluded, joking.

The fat man answered with a hearty laugh and motioned to two of his men, who disappeared into the frigate’s hold. Since Grigán was the only one who spoke Junian, the others got by with a simple smile, impatient for Grigán to translate.

“Are you from Junine?” Grigán asked casually.

“Oh, you’re a smart one, aren’t you,” he replied, laughing again.

“How is everything over there? I heard the succession wasn’t going so well.”

“Always the same stories. Ever since the queen reached an age where she can’t have children, the schemes have been flying. Despite the treaties, all the barons would like to add a piece of our beautiful land to their domains. People say that Séhane’s longevity is ruining several of their gambits. Too bad for them! So much the better for us!”

“I heard someone tried to assassinate her, is that true?”

“If it’s true, it was kept under wraps. No one would have allowed that. The people would have chased the barons back to the borders, jabbing at those fat bastards with daggers—pardon my language!”

The two Junian men reappeared, struggling to carry an enormous barrel of freshwater. A few others helped them tie it to a hoist.

“It wasn’t a baron. I heard it was a Zü who tried to infiltrate the palace,” Grigán continued.

“That would surprise me. Or he must have been really clever. Not even mice can enter into the Broken Castle without proving their loyalty. So

a red killer; you really think so!?”

“So you don’t like them much in Junine either, do you?”

“Absolutely not. We’re not about to let them walk around with their poisoned daggers in our town, not like they do in Goran or Lorelia. Not that we would let them in our city without their daggers, either!”

The barrel was lowered to the sloop’s deck, and Yan and Bowbaq worked on untying it, without understanding a single word of the conversation. Grigán went down to the hold for a moment, to return with a full purse and a jug of liquor. He tied both to the free lines of the hoist, despite the captain’s polite refusal. The Junian captain had done them a greater favor than he realized, though perhaps not in the way he thought he had. Regardless, the heirs owed him.

The crews waved their good-byes, and the ships sailed off in opposite directions. Grigán summarized the conversation, the news of which brought both joy and relief to his companions. The Züu weren’t in Junine. The queen wasn’t their mysterious enemy; on the contrary, she would help them identify him. Perhaps she could even find more heirs, if there were any left...



Every lesson with Corenn was a privilege for Yan. The Mother could always captivate him, as strange, disturbing, or mundane as the subject could seem at first glance.

The young man had not called upon his Will for several days, but he had learned more about magic by merely discussing it with Corenn than by practicing to move small trinkets with his mind. The Mother had even gone so far as to ask him to stop these exercises for a while. And what she was teaching him gave him enough subject matter to keep his mind occupied.

They had spent the first several decadays spelling out a certain theory of magic, not useful in and of itself, but it allowed Yan to better understand the more technical themes that Corenn would later explain. Yan enjoyed these mental games. Corenn was making him more... intelligent, he felt, more perceptive than he had ever been.

Certain reflections had affected him so strongly that they followed him into his sleep. He looked back on several of them:

With your Will, it will be easier to push than to pull. Easier to cut down than to build up. Easier to destroy than to create.

With just a little rage, you could explode a rock into dust. But it would require complete serenity to reconstruct it. That's the beautiful thing about it.

Serenity is magic. Patience, reflection, and moderation are magic. Using anger to arouse your Will is an aberration. Worse, it's dangerous...

The body normally limits a person's folly, their fury, their thirst for chaos. The Will liberates the spirit. It allows you to break past this limit. If your spirit is momentarily destructive, the effects will be devastating. It will not spare the body—or the mind—of the person who unleashes it.

Never call upon your Will under the influence of rage, suffering, or liquor, she had concluded with a grave tone.

Corenn's sermon impressed him. The young man thought for a long time about her wise warning. He wasn't going to forget it.

And another time she said, "Magic doesn't create anything. Everything you draw from it, everything you do with it, is already there, somewhere, around us. If you make a mountain grow, you will have simply brought the earth underneath to the surface. If you make a flower grow, you will have simply nourished a nearby seed."

"You can do that?" he asked with surprise.

"Of course. You're capable of anything your mind can imagine. Except to *create*. Only the gods are privileged with that power. And unwinding time's work. That's the most powerful force in this world. Even gods succumb to it... what has already been made is unchangeable. Gods can revive a man centuries after his death. Priests have told such stories. But even the eternalists can't do anything to change the fact that he was once dead."

This type of thinking made Yan feel a bit crazy. Corenn knew she was going fast in her teachings. For a simple fifteen-year-old fisherman, it was a lot to understand, let alone accept as truth, in such a short time span. But this fisherman was hardly stupid. Corenn felt rushed by their situation. It was impossible to know how many days were left before the Züu—or another catastrophe—interfered with their little project.

She needed to teach the young man as much and as quickly as she could, and not just because it would be useful in their quest. No, Yan had such a true talent that it would be criminal to leave it in such a raw state.

"Tell me again what you felt after releasing your Will," the Mother asked her student. "The painful moment."

The young man had no problem recalling the dreadful experience, which he had already gone through several times.

"It was like... the rest of the world threw itself at me. Brutally. A little bit like waking up, but much more unpleasant. You feel like you are in a freefall and burning up at the same time. Your eyes burn, your ears buzz..."

"That doesn't last long," Corenn interrupted him. "I will teach you how to suffer less during this phase. I'd rather you describe how you felt *after*."

"An intense weakness. I have never been so tired. And I was cold, unless that was a coincidence."

"Absolutely not. That's exactly what it is. *Languor*. That's what we call the sensation you felt."

Yan impatiently waited for her to continue. He saw the expression on Corenn's face and recognized that she was about to confide an important principle of magic to him.

"With your Will, your mind sends a force that acts on your target. This force comes from within your own body. The *languor* is the aftereffect. The more difficult the task that you are trying to accomplish, the more it will weaken you. We also call it the spell's *backlash*. It denotes the very edge of magic's possibilities."

Yan noted, "At least it passes relatively quickly. You just have to rest for a while..."

"In the state of *languor*, your mind steals force from all that surrounds you, until it can bring your body up to a tolerable threshold. In turn, the grass, the earth, the trees themselves steal force from their neighbors, and the exchange goes on until it reaches your target, where there is now a surplus of force. Only when that force returns to you all at once is an equilibrium reached."

"That's one of your personal theories, right? I recognize your style!"

"I won't answer that. Think what you will," Corenn said, smiling.

"It's definitely true," Yan decided. "I like the idea of exchanging a little life with trees."



The Mother had never seen things this way. It was a lovely image, even if it wasn't the subject of the lesson. Yan needed to learn to be careful with his Will. Perhaps even to fear it. She composed herself into a more serious expression, and began teaching again.

"Yan, the languor can be *fatal*. If one day your Will exceeds your reason, if you bring it so high that it escapes your control, your instinct to survive, it will take all the force from your body to satisfy its need. You will experience a horrible agony, violent and painful. Be aware of your fragility. Don't ask your mind to do things that your body can't handle."

The young man nodded his head with dread. These past few days, Corenn had warned him of so many things that he would need a profound motivation to call on his power.

"So making a flower grow instantaneously is actually impossible," he remarked. "Unless you are ready to die for it."

"There is another possibility. But it requires mastery and serenity. You just have to draw enough power for your spell not from within yourself, but from the things around you."

Yan whistled in admiration. It was already hard enough for him to draw the force from within himself. "Have you done it before?"

"Partially. I force myself to make it a habit. It would be vital, if I ever reach the age of an Ancestress. There is not a lot of force to draw from an old body, unfortunately, even though the mind is more powerful than ever."

Yan tried to imagine Corenn as an ancient Mother, wrinkled and stooped. She would surely be the most respected woman in the Matriarchy, a chief of their government, their symbolic queen. It could happen, if not for the Züu...

Hopeful, he asked, "Will you teach me that too?"

Corenn smiled and agreed. She was going to teach him everything, no matter if he asked. After a few more *dékades*, Yan would be as good a magician as she.



They came within sight of Galen at dawn on their sixth day at sea. The dawn corresponded with the second day of the Hunter's *dékade*, the Day of the Fawn. They were a little ahead of their predictions, which they

welcomed happily. The seas had been calm, and Yan's limited experience with navigation had been sufficient to ensure an unremarkable crossing.

As they neared the mouth of the Ubese River, they came across more and more boats. There were the usual commercial frigates, schooners, skiffs, dinghies, barges, coasters, and other sailing vessels, but there also were several warships equipped with foreboding naval rams. Though formidable, the war vessels bobbed peacefully in the water, on guard to defend the city from pirates.

The heirs spent the day lounging on deck, taking advantage of the particularly generous rays the sun bestowed upon the Lower Kingdoms. Yan and Rey handled the few maneuvers to direct the ship up the river without incident while the others conversed, taking in the surroundings.

"We should always travel like this," Léti suggested. "No worries, no threats, always quiet..."

"You want to spend your whole life on a boat? What a nightmare!" Bowbaq protested.

"I agree with Bowbaq," Rey added. "It's far too boring."

"And we wouldn't be that much safer in the end," Grigán said. "To escape the Züu only to end up a pirate's slave or drowned in a squall!"

"Does anyone find it bizarre that we can start sailing up a river like this?" asked Yan. "I mean without anyone even asking us for anything?"

The warrior changed lookout positions before answering.

"No! The river belongs to everyone. They can't impede boat traffic, not without sparking a civil war. Several Baronies border the Ubese, and the Galen Barony has no more right to it than any other.

Yan found it amusing that in spite of what he was saying, Grigán was still busying himself by keeping a close watch on every boat they crossed.

"Have you been to Junine before?" Yan asked.

"Twice. I've never met a more nationalistic people. The whole world could fall into bloody chaos, and they would still be preoccupied by their petty internal squabbles. They're also a steadfast people. When an enemy attacks their walls, you won't find a more relentless bunch of warriors," Grigán informed him.

"It's just about the smallest Barony," Corenn added. "The barons chose it as their capital and consolidated the Small Kingdoms' administrative offices there. They also say it's the most beautiful."

“That’s what I think. The barons gather there for their parliament, but it’s also an excuse for them to compete in some remarkable hunting games. Yan, I might get the chance to show you an *acchor*,” Grigán concluded, referencing his scar.

They sailed past Galen without even realizing it. The river mouth was so wide that they sailed past the city at a distance. The city was so far, in fact, that they could only make out the boats of the outer harbor—the walls and spires of the city still lay somewhere behind the veil of the horizon. That’s just about all they saw in the northern Small Kingdoms. The *Othenor* was soon gliding between two lush banks upon which an occasional village or windmill would appear to break the monotony.

The Ubese River was a genuine trade route, and the heirs saw nearly as many boats as they had at Galen. The majority were small barges with modest sails, but they livened things up nonetheless. Léti answered politely to all the greetings the sailors shouted to her.

“The people here aren’t used to seeing a woman wear a broadsword,” Grigán remarked. “They aren’t as open-minded as Loreliens. You might want to take it off for a few days.”

“Out of the question. They’ll just have to get used to it.”

Rey clarified, with a devious grin. “Oh, I don’t think they’re shocked, rather they see you as a stranger, an exotic wildling, a little libertine, maybe. They start fantasizing.”

Léti blushed red to her ears and said nothing. She stopped responding to the barge crews’ greetings from then on. A few of them shouted out some banter that Grigán refused to translate.

The *Othenor* came upon Lake Junine near the end of the fifth deciday. Grigán was pleased that they reached the capital before nightfall. As the boat drifted into the channel leading to the harbor, the heirs had a chance to soak in the Barony’s beauty.

It was entirely different from the desolate landscapes that surrounded Lorelia, and the scant scrubland of Southern Kaul. Junine had been built in the heart of lush rolling hills. Here, there were no traditional Lorelien trees. Gone was the hardwood and the lubilee, the plon and the séda bushes. The Small Kingdoms were the land of acidic pines, maoal trees, cloud-masks, crale trees, majors, and moon-grass. The hills were made of a palette with as many shades of color as there were stars in the sky.

Several crenellated and golden towers popped out from the colorful background, attesting to the wealth and defiance of the city's inhabitants. All the barons were kings, with Junine being the capital of their community, and they each owned at least one residence there that was worthy of their lofty position. The sky was so full of towers that even from the lake you could see many palaces that rivaled the Small Palace of Lorelia, where the heirs had narrowly escaped death.

Yan adeptly guided the sloop to the harbor's interior, at ease on the calm water. They slowly pulled up to a dock where several vessels of the same size were already moored. Grigán was the first to jump onto solid ground with an agility that would have even been surprising coming from a younger man. He secured the mooring lines without a wasted movement, tethering the boat to the dock and allowing the others to join him. Bowbaq was the next one off the boat.

The giant had a nearly uncontrollable urge to throw himself flat on the dock to verify its solidity with his own hands. And he would have done so if they had landed at a more deserted location. Six days on the open sea wasn't enough to cure his fear of the ocean. The only thing he'd learned was to keep his eyes on the sky rather than the ocean's dark and unstable depths. He was happier about the journey's end than any one of his companions.

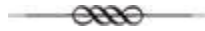
Soon enough, all the heirs were off the boat. After several training sessions at sea on Grigán's infamous firm-footing rule, Léti found this new surface that didn't undulate a bit unsettling.

Grigán got directions from the harbormaster's office and, accompanied by Corenn, separated from the others to settle the mooring fees. To keep a low profile, the heirs had to respect Junine's laws. It was out of the question to repeat the events in Lorelia now that they were wanted by the Züu, the Grand Guild, and the Lorelien guards.

Yan scrutinized the city: straight and wide streets, sturdy stone houses that gave the impression of fortresses, and the crenellated towers of royal residences. *So this is Junine*, he thought. *Another land. Another continent.*

There was no guarantee that they would find help, or even refuge, but of all the thoughts that filled the young man's subconscious, that wasn't the most important. He was on the same quest with Léti, Corenn, and a few strangers who, in only a few dékades, had become closer friends than he could have ever hoped to have.

The image of L  ti filled Yan's mind as his eyes traced the rise and fall of the lofty towers of the city. Her face was beautiful, but for a few dark, fearful shadows. Yan forced himself not to think about the memory of L  ti dangling over the abyss, most of the time. But when night came, at that moment when his mind freed itself of the day's mirages, he would painfully remember the fear in her face as he reached for her, and he would be reminded that their journey was nothing more than a race. A race in which they kept losing more ground. A race against death.



It was much too late to ask for an audience with S  hane, and the heirs weren't in such a hurry to rush to the palace. The guards would have probably turned them away as soon as they saw their tattered clothes anyhow.

Corenn suggested that they spend their first night in the Baronies at an inn. Everyone agreed. They all wanted to leave the *Othenor*'s cabins, which still reeked of fish. The Mother reminded them that they would be able to take a bath, a rare luxury for these fugitives who had been washing with a pail since leaving Raji's caves.

Motivated by the promise of a comfortable night at an inn, they quickly gathered their packs, leaving only the useless and cumbersome bags on the boat. Their future was uncertain, and the heirs needed to be ready to flee at any moment, maybe even to abandon the *Othenor* altogether if they must. Grig  n didn't need to warn them. They already had it in mind.

Rey had a moment of indecision with the treasure he had stolen at the Small Palace: It was too heavy for him to carry all of it with any discretion, and the decision to leave it behind was made with much difficulty and deliberation. Eventually he filled his coin purse and other bags until they bulged with gold. He handed out handfuls to his companions, who themselves struggled to find enough space for the money. Lorelien gold terces were beautiful, sure, but much heavier and imposing than the little three-queen Kaulien pieces. The actor finished by stashing the rest of the treasure in two hiding places in the hold. Finally, he joined the others on the docks, weighed down by his luggage. A broad smile could be seen stretching across the actor's face, even as he shifted his pack from one shoulder to the other.

Junine hosted many foreigners, so many that the inhabitants hardly paid any attention to the strange procession marching through their streets. Only Bowbaq and Léti drew a few looks: the giant for his size; the girl for her sword. Yan didn't feel uneasy as the Junians looked on.

The people of Junine, by all appearances, managed to avoid poverty. Men and women were often dressed in a simple long robe, appropriate dress for the heat. The robes were finely crafted out of choice fabrics, and many of the Junians wore expensive jewelry around their necks and on their fingers. Yan figured that the city must be sufficiently safe, as no one seemed to be worried about being robbed at the end of an alley.

Numerous artisanal shops lined the street, such as barbers, coopers, hunters, and other specialists, among which were the famous winemakers whose exceptional bottles were known as far away as the Upper Kingdoms. Rey promised himself to buy a good stock of green wine before going back to sea.

They chose to stop at the Nightwind, which they found to be clean and respectable. It was much more hospitable than the inns along the port, and Grigán took care of reserving them a large room. The heirs settled in and stretched out on beds that actually earned the name.

Corenn asked for them to heat up a bath, which gave the innkeeper the chance to show them a quintessential Junian specialty, one that was the pride of his establishment. He had diverted a spring of clear water with underwater canals. He only had to maintain a flame under a basin of water to keep a continuous source of hot water, which flowed through the bath and then drained into another underground basin. The bath was always kept clean and warm, and the heirs took turns indulging in this new marvel. Bowbaq was enthralled by this idea and thought about how he could use it in his own home.

One by one, they descended down the stairs and sat in the common room, delighted at the prospect of having a meal without dried meat, a dish they had eaten all too much of these past few days. They were waiting only for Léti to join them downstairs. It was in this moment that the night's only unpleasant event occurred.

The young woman came down well after all the others. She had spent a long time tying her hair in an elegant style, looking for a compromise between her teacher's advice and her own natural desire to entice. The result was magnificent. She had also changed clothes and was wearing a

light Kaulien tunic that fit her perfectly. The broadsword and its sheath were still at her side.

Two men seated at a table between the stairs and the heirs shouted at her, asking her something. Léti didn't speak Junian, so she settled for giving them a smile and signaled that she didn't understand. The two men burst out in crude laughter that immediately reminded her of the Guild *brothers* on Ji. They were drunk. She took a step away from them, but one of the men approached her. He meant her no harm, yet he was blocking her way.

Yan, Rey, and Bowbaq were already standing and ready to intervene.

Grigán hadn't moved. "Don't move," he whispered.

The three men sat down again. Though they didn't understand the warrior's reaction, they yielded to his authority. They watched the scene in silence, unable to avoid feeling like cowards. Yan promised himself he would spring on the first one who touched his friend, no matter what Grigán thought.

Léti redoubled her polite efforts to get the man to understand that she wanted to get by, but the drunk man mocked her, nudging elbows with his friend. From her position, she couldn't see her friends. She remained calm, though, comforted by remembering that the *dékade* before she had slit a Zü's throat. These drunkards did not scare her.

After politeness, there was force. She pushed the man to the side, not violently, but enough to clear the way. She was still smiling, but her smile vanished when the Junian grabbed her wrist. She recoiled reflexively and kicked her adversary between the legs. He crumpled to his stomach, letting her go. *Firm footing. Sharp mind.*

She stepped over the man, with a little apologetic wave, but caressing the handle of her broadsword. The drunkards weren't laughing anymore. Yan and Bowbaq rose and escorted her to their table. The sight of the giant eliminated any belligerent ideas the Junians had.

Silently Grigán put away the dirk he had hidden under the table, happy to no longer have a reason to use it.

"You got out of that well. Really, I would have been less patient than you with those idiots," Grigán complimented her.

Léti thanked him with a simple nod of the head. It was the first time Grigán had coughed up a compliment, and they were both too proud to show their newfound affection.



Early the next morning, Corenn and Grigán went to Séhane's palace to request an audience. The warrior knew the city well enough to lead them to the royal residence, whose towers could be spotted from any angle in the vicinity.

They called the palace the Broken Castle. True to its name, it looked more like a fortified manor than a luxurious Lorelien hotel. It hadn't been broken for a long time. On the contrary, it looked fit to endure the most brutal sieges. By tradition, the building kept its original name, which it had held since before the First Treaty of the Baronies. At that time, Junine suffered so many assaults that the castle had been flattened and rebuilt several times.

These new walls had never faltered, and Corenn studied their architecture with admiration. She walked through an outer wall, passing under a heavy wooden door, which to their luck was open. This interior courtyard was just as big as the Grand House's square in Kaul. Housed there were guards, stables and enclosures, the workshops of royal artisans, and administrative offices. Only the soldiers slept within the walls, as the Broken Castle couldn't house all of the queen's employees. There were still plenty enough to constitute a little city within a city.

Corenn and Grigán had advanced only twenty yards toward the entry into the inner enclosure when a suspicious guard stopped them. With all the discussion about the succession of the throne, the guards were more wary than usual. Grigán asked for the chamberlain's office, and the guard escorted them to one of the largest buildings, equally as interested in helping as keeping an eye on them.

They stood in a line that already stretched ten yards long—every soul in front of them wanted to meet Séhane or pass along a message. The queen kept an open ear to her people, and it seemed to serve her well. But the chamberlains, who gave each request due consideration, only granted approval to a few. "The queen is tired," they would respond. "She is very busy revising a new treaty with the barons. You may be able to find a magistrate who would be sympathetic to your affair." The Junians would then leave with obvious disappointment on their faces.

After a long wait it was Corenn and Grigán's turn. The chamberlain scoffed mildly at these strangers who wanted to meddle in the kingdom's business, but ordered them to present their request anyway.



“We would like to meet Her Majesty,” Corenn announced in Ithare, since she couldn’t speak their native Junian.

“For what purpose?” the man asked in Ithare, unable to hide his boredom at their request.

“I cannot say. I would be putting Her Majesty in danger by explaining myself in the presence of strangers’ ears.”

The man cocked an eyebrow in surprise and examined the Mother and the warrior. “You must know that a joke of this kind could cost you several days in prison.”

“Unfortunately, this is not a joke.”

The chamberlain scoffed again and stood to exchange a few words with one of the guards stationed behind him. Corenn sensed Grigán’s restlessness. In principle, they were in friendly territory, but the warrior had a hard time dealing with the suspicious look coming from this man armed with a spear, regardless if he was an ally or not.

The chamberlain led them to a small room behind his office and bolted the door. This place seemed like it was designed for this sort of occasion. There were no windows and not a single crack in the walls, allowing for complete and utter discretion. The only furnishings were four modest chairs. All three individuals took a seat, their faces displaying the gravity required for the situation.

“Now, tell me more,” he said.

“In no way do I mean to offend you, but I doubt you will understand what I have to say. Our affair is known uniquely by the queen, and I trust she has kept it secret.”

“I’m the one who decides whether or not an affair requires Her Majesty’s attention. It’s up to you to convince me.”

Grigán sighed heavily. This situation reminded him too much of their conversations at the Small Palace.

“Please tell her that we’re the heirs,” asked the Mother. “My name is Corenn. She will understand and agree to receive us.”

The latter part of her statement was more of a hope than a certainty, but the Mother’s intonation didn’t betray her doubts. The chamberlain stared blankly at them briefly, perhaps waiting for further explanation. The word “heir” had hit a chord with him, as the succession was the main concern these days for all Junians. He stood up. “Stay here.”

The order wasn't needed. Besides, the guard that Grigán caught a glimpse of as the chamberlain exited would have made sure they respected it.

"What do you think?" he asked Corenn.

"She will meet with us," the Mother stated. "If only out of curiosity."

However, the wait that followed their exchange was a long one, and Grigán was on his feet, pacing around the room to pass the time. While he walked, he stroked his mustache, a sure sign of nervousness. Even though they hadn't expected it to be easy, there had been no doubt that they would at least be granted an audience... until now.

At last, the chamberlain was back. For a fleeting moment, Grigán saw in him a resemblance to a Zü priest, with his fine robe and his haughty attitude. He kept his mistrust quiet long enough to listen.

"Have you come from the island of Ji?" he asked with interest.

"Yes."

"Her Majesty agrees to meet with you."

Corenn let out a sigh of relief. They had crossed the sea for this sole purpose, and to have met failure now would have been hard to swallow. Séhane was their best chance at getting somewhere in their quest. Their only one, in fact.

"When?"

"This evening. How many are in your party?"

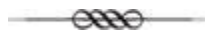
The Mother searched for a cue from Grigán. There was no reason to hide their number, but this question seemed out of place.

"Her Majesty believes you are not alone," the chamberlain added. "You are going to be honored by dining at her table. I need to know so that I can inform the chef."

"There are six of us," Corenn said with resolve.

The rest of their meeting was dedicated to settling key details for the meeting, including the absolute rule against carrying a weapon. Grigán warned him that he would carry his broadsword anyway, and that he would leave it with the guards upon arrival. The chamberlain reluctantly accepted.

The warrior had a sense of foreboding. This kind of intuition had kept him out of harm's way in the past. Under any other circumstances he would have left the city, but the danger was no less prevalent outside the walls of the Broken Castle than inside of them.



A man with a painted face walked on a fertile field. He had made a long journey to meet another whom he thought of as inferior. It was a terrible humiliation to come so far out of his way to meet someone of such low standing. *Zuïa had no pity*, he mused. She had no mercy for those who betrayed her trust. For failures, like him. He deserved punishment.

Warriors with strange faces and odd weapons cleared the way in front of him. None of them could hold his dark gaze, his eyes carrying the only flicker of life in his face painted like a skull. The man knew that these men had sworn to die for some superstitious cult. He walked past swaths of them, more than two hundred, who were chanting an incantation to protect them from the “dark eye.” Soon the entire camp resonated with the monotonous chant, repeated ten times by thousands of warriors, archers, cavalry, and other men-at-arms that the Accuser had gathered.

The only thing he felt toward them was scorn. He hastened toward the group of tents that held the captains. He had never been here. But the Accuser had to be with his captains. He slipped in under the stretched canvas tents. The guards made no motion to stop him. If they had tried, he would have slit their throats. He almost regretted that they had simply let him through.

“Zamerine,” a voice called from inside. It was a voice Zamerine recognized instantly, though he had heard it only once before. “Have you come here to tell me about how your miserable little murderers failed?”

The voice came from a man who was comfortably seated in a sumptuous seat, the type of comfort that didn’t belong in a military encampment. The man was wearing a thick coat of mail and a helmet encircled by a wide black band. Zamerine didn’t know his name. He was just the Accuser.

He didn’t respond, because they weren’t alone. A second man eyed Zamerine with a calculating air. He must have been from the same land as the thousands of warriors teeming outside. If for no other reason, Zamerine stared back at him. This barbarian was the largest human he had ever seen. Larger, even, than the fugitive Bowbaq. And his strength seemed proportionate to his size. Zamerine fingered the hilt of his dagger; even for a man that size, all it would take was a scratch with his *hati* to send him to his grave.

The giant said something to the Accuser in one of the strange languages spoken in this place. The two men burst out laughing, and the giant left without so much as a look at Zamerine. Now, the killer could talk. “Just because Zuia expresses her justice through your words doesn’t give you the right to insult me with impunity. I strongly suggest that you don’t do it again,” Zamerine said.

The Accuser leapt up from his seat and ran toward Zamerine. The Zü had his *hati* drawn in a flash.

“Give me that dagger! Give it to me!” the Accuser yelled.

“You know that I would never do that,” Zamerine reassured him.

The Accuser took a step back and put out his hand. Zamerine handed the blade over to his adversary, without knowing why. He had been resisting it with all his force at the same time. The Accuser had put a *pressure* on his mind, controlling him like a marionette, forcing him to watch the strange sight as if from outside his own body.

The Accuser took off his left glove. His skin was wrinkled and spotted by old age. His fingers delicate but strong. And he didn’t so much as flinch as he forcefully shoved the *hati* through his wrist.

“Your poison can’t do anything to me!” he screamed. “You are nothing! Don’t come here, in the middle of my army, and tell me what I can or can’t do. I control the whole world! You understand? I have all the power!”

Then he turned his back to Zamerine, giving himself enough time to put his glove back on over his unbloodied hand and gather his thoughts. He handed the dagger back to Zamerine and released his mind.

Zamerine had never experienced anything so traumatizing. The Accuser had paralyzed him, had stripped him of control. No, he hadn’t made this voyage to meet with a mere mortal after all.

A few moments of absolute silence followed. The Accuser finally returned to the subject at hand.

“So. How’s our business coming along?” he said evenly, as if nothing had just occurred.

Zamerine gave him a detailed report, relieved to have things return to their normal course, although for a Zü that meant conspiracy, hunting, and murders.

“We are almost certain that the meddlers are in Junine. I was hoping to go there myself to put an end to this story.”

“That won’t be necessary, my little Zü-Zü. You will be much more useful here. You are staying, aren’t you?”

Zamerine could still feel the steel vise of the Accuser on his mind, annihilating his free will. There was no question. If he didn’t want to become the Accuser’s slave, he would have to become his ally.

“If I could help you...”

“You won’t regret it. I know how to reward my friends,” the helmeted man said, with a troubling intonation.

“And... the fugitives?” Zamerine reminded him, timidly.

“They’re as good as dead. I am going to send them something much more dangerous than your kids in their red tunics.”

The Accuser savored this moment. His creature had been sleeping for too long. It was time to wake it.



The heirs spent a considerable amount of time preparing for their meeting with Queen Séhane. They were all overjoyed when Corenn and Grigán delivered the news, though Grigán couldn’t bring himself to share his ominous feelings. Their first day in the Baronies crawled by, impatient as they were for the evening to come.

Léti and Corenn visited several tailors and shoemakers and came back with a set of long robes and laced shoes, classic Junian attire. A pair for each heir. Grigán thanked his friends for thinking of him, but insisted on keeping his black-leather outfit. He made do by polishing off the layer of sea salt that had accumulated on it while on the *Othenor*.

Rey played with his newfound wealth by making several purchases, which he revealed to the group at the last minute. The actor had dressed himself head to toe in the traditional attire of Lorelien nobility. Léti stared wide-eyed at the sight of her friend’s light cape and delicately crafted shirt. Yan blushed at the sight of her overt admiration for Rey. He looked down at his robe, feeling ridiculous. Even the fact that Bowbaq looked even more ridiculous wasn’t enough to console him.

Like Grigán, Léti decided to carry her broadsword, too, though her sheath concealed no extra dagger like the warrior’s. She had grown so accustomed to carrying it the past few days that she would have felt

vulnerable without the cold sensation of steel against her thigh. She didn't want to feel vulnerable ever again.

The small group started their walk over to the palace as the seventh deciday neared. They drew plenty of curious looks from the Junians, although none was overly suspicious, and the heirs reached the palace walls without trouble.

The chamberlain they had met before was waiting for them at the outer wall. He greeted them politely and led them to the citadel, escorted by four stone-faced guards armed with traditional spears.

It seemed like an excessive escort to Grigán, but then again he knew nothing about the Broken Castle's customs. He allowed himself and his companions to be led through the inner wall and finally into the castle itself with a wary eye, but without complaint.

Neither the architecture nor the decorations could compare to the pretentious luxury of Lorelien palaces. The Junian royal residence was welcoming but understated, spacious but intelligently designed. It was a prestigious building, but also one where plenty of work was done.

The heirs followed the chamberlain through several rooms until he stopped and pointed toward an ordinary-looking door at the end of a hallway.

"Her Majesty will join you shortly. You must leave your weapons with the guards."

Léti waited to see Grigán's reaction before removing her sword. The warrior surrendered his weapon but, as expected, kept his sheath. The Junians thought nothing of it.

Corenn pushed open the door and entered what appeared to be a reception hall. Wood crackled in a huge fireplace. Despite the warm sun outside, it was cold within the castle walls. Seven lavish chairs were placed around an equally stunning table, which was filled with an array of porcelain dishes and the finest silver cutlery. The walls were decorated with hunting trophies, magnificent paintings, and tapestries that represented several of the Baronies' significant historical events, such as the signing ceremony of the First Treaty.

The heirs marveled at it all as they waited. Grigán nudged Yan and pointed at a mounted *acchor* head, unable to hold back a smile. The young man wondered if the artisan who made the trophy had a tendency toward sensationalism or if he had only preserved the animal's dying expression.

Without question it was a terrifying beast. A sort of giant wolf equipped with a boar's defenses. Yan thought he recognized its skin as the same material that Grigán's leather outfit was made of, but he didn't have the time to ask. The door opened.

An elderly woman dressed in a classic Junian robe walked toward the center of the room with two well-built guards on her either side. The only things that distinguished her from commoners were her elaborate hair and the modest crown she wore.

"You're not Séhane," Corenn stated, to her companions' surprise. "I wasn't lying when I said that I've met her."

The woman turned to the nearest guard, unsure of how to react. Grigán took a step back and placed a hand on his sheath, his fears suddenly materializing.

After a prolonged silence, another woman made her entrance looking so tired that even walking seemed difficult. The guards respectfully cleared the way for her. No crown sat upon her head, but there was no question she was their queen.

"Lady Corenn," she greeted in a shaky voice. "I'm happy to see you again."

"Majesty," the Mother said with a bow. "It's an honor that you remember me."

"Oh! My memory isn't as perfect as you might think. Indeed, it's my mistrust in it that made me resort to this scheme. I feared that I wouldn't recognize you and that I could be tricked or harmed. The sound of your voice alone was enough to convince me."

Séhane thanked the guards and the lady who had so bravely, though unconvincingly, played her role. The queen knew that she had nothing to fear of Corenn and that she could certainly trust her friends too.

The Mother took it upon herself to introduce everyone, which she did with the respect and graciousness fit for a queen.

But Séhane found her friend's formality out of place. "Corenn, during our conversations in Kaul, you called me Séhane. Have I aged so much to lose your friendship?"

The heirs liked her right from the start. Although she was a queen, and much older than anyone in the group, Séhane was an heir too. Her ancestor, King Arkane, had lived through the experience on Ji and had come back with an arm missing. As punishment for his refusal to relay the events that

occurred on Ji, his peers had made him an outcast. He had suffered, and passed on a memory of this suffering to later generations. Indeed, Séhane endured this strange curse like the rest of them. They didn't know each other and perhaps only had this one thing in common, but it was more than enough to make them feel close.

Séhane had never participated in the reunions on the Day of the Owl. She had no idea what happened on Ji during the gatherings. And she had never, at least up until now, been threatened by the Züu.

"You hid yourself behind plenty of mysteries in order to meet with me. I suppose there was a reason for that..." Séhane began.

"The worst possible reason, Séhane. We're in danger, and we think that you are too," Corenn explained.

The queen listened with an attentive ear as Corenn filled her in on how the Züu had launched a war against the heirs. She didn't leave out any details, telling her everything from their individual experiences in the Small Palace to their episodes in Berce. She paused only when the servants brought the courses to the table. By the end of her story, Séhane had heard all there was to tell. Almost. Corenn intentionally left out their escape from the island of Ji.

"What a frightening story," the queen commented. "Who could this mysterious enemy be? Why is he after the heirs?"

"We're searching for the answers, Séhane. We must find other survivors. One of them might know something."

"On that point, this could be a great help," the queen began, pulling a parchment from her pocket. "A boat from Mestèbe delivered it to me a few days ago. For a moment I thought that you might have been the sender, but I realize now that is not the case."

Uncertain, Corenn took the paper Séhane held out to her and quickly read over it. There were only a few words in Ithare. "There's some hope that we've found another heir," Corenn announced. "The letter reads: *Your Majesty, if the name Ji rings like a curse in your mind, we can be of service to one another. Send a reply with the bird that I hope has survived the journey.* And further down it reads: *If you live in peace, then please, do nothing. Either way, may Eurydis hear your prayers.* It isn't signed. I'm guessing the letter arrived with some kind of carrier pigeon?"

"Indeed. Does this mean something to you?"

The heirs exchanged curious looks but offered no answer.



In her mind, Corenn sifted through the names of the few heirs who might still be alive. There was no way to guess who the author of the message was. And why send it to Séhane, the person who was the least involved?

“Have you sent a reply already?” Grigán asked, concerned.

“No. I more or less live in peace; I heeded the advice. The bird is somewhere in my aviary.”

“We must reply without delay... if you allow it.”

“Of course. I’ll send for the bird to be brought right away. I hope that it isn’t too late to warn this stranger about their peril.”

“Given the letter’s tone, I’m guessing they’re already in the know,” Rey said. “When someone starts calling on the gods like that, it means they’ve seen death up close.”

The actor was so excited by this new development that he had lost all restraint. Séhane remained silent, and it was her stillness that reminded Rey that everyone was talking about her dying, and he blushed in embarrassment, a rare occurrence.

A servant brought the bird, and the heirs carefully crafted their message, which was short but critical. They then tied it to the bird’s foot and released it through a window. They watched as it found its bearings before flying toward the north.

The letter had brought them some hope, and they hoped theirs would bring the same to the sender.

A bird flew toward Mestèbe carrying their message: “Come to Junine. Be discreet. Friends await you.”



Séhane offered to let the heirs stay in the Broken Castle while they were in Junine. Her hospitality was sincere and friendly, and the heirs accepted her offer without hesitating. Grigán saw it as a strategic advantage, but the others were simply excited about staying in a palace and the nice days to come.

“Going from a smuggler’s cellar to a royal bedroom; that’s what I call a social upgrade,” Rey joked. “I wonder where we’ll be in a décade?”

His quip had a lukewarm effect. Everyone was too worried about the future to smile.

Séhane was generous with her good deeds, and as soon as the servants were alerted, they immediately prepared their new guests' bedrooms and dressing rooms, as was customary in the Junian palace.

After getting the heirs' permission, the queen sent three men to find their baggage at the inn. Grigán and Rey offered to accompany them. The actor couldn't trust some unknown servant, as honest as he may be, with his sack of gold.

Choosing rooms proved to be a briefly embarrassing moment for the heirs since the intendant had to ask if there were any couples among the queen's guests. There were none, at least not officially, but Léti didn't like the idea of sleeping alone in an enormous room, and would have liked to ask Yan if he could make some room for her. Only as friends, of course. They had done it so often...

But that was in Eza, or in the heirs' makeshift encampments. Here, her question would seem out of place. As the silence dragged on, the intendant felt guilty for asking the question. He hadn't expected it to cause a dilemma!

Corenn finally spoke up, "I would like to have my niece near me tonight. I am growing old, unfortunately, and don't handle changing beds very well. Her presence will put me at ease and help me sleep."

Léti laughed to herself, and gave Corenn a smile, full of gratitude for the lie. She always seemed to know everything. Léti cursed her fear of solitude, but at least the others didn't suspect anything.

Soon Grigán and Rey were back, and the heirs took leave of Séhane; they each parted with a few words of thanks. It was the first time that someone had offered to help, without expecting anything in return.

That night, Léti dreamed that the Züu had disappeared, that Ji was engulfed by the sea. She dreamed that Yan asked for her Promise and that they moved to the Broken Castle with their friends, to stay. The sun shone brightly the next morning, but none of her dreams came true with the dawn.

Except, maybe, the part about the Züu. Determined to take another lesson with Grigán, she dressed quickly and grabbed her broadsword, which had been returned the night before. The Züu could disappear. It was only a question of *firm footing, steady hand, and sharp mind*.



Séhane informed her friends that she would be busy all day and apologized for her absence. She assigned them a full-time intendant whose only job was to make the heirs feel at home. In the days that followed, the heirs witnessed firsthand the queen's devotion to managing Junine's domestic affairs, and to a certain degree, the affairs of all the Baronies. Her persistence, which showed despite her age and sickness, increased their admiration for her.

Their intendant was a Junian through and through: proud, sometimes condescending, but always polite and obliging in his acts and words. Crépel was his name, and Séhane had chosen him because he spoke perfect Ithare, the only common language among the heirs.

Léti and Grigán were the first to ask him for a favor, namely finding a suitable spot for them to train. Crépel didn't say a word, simply leading them to the castle's armory. The warrior pulled Bowbaq along after them, and Rey joined them of his own accord. No one minded.

The room was huge, large enough even to practice archery. Weapons of all sorts hung on the walls: swords, broadswords, dirks, daggers, axes, maces, flails—all the tools of man's destructive genius were displayed here. Grigán, himself, was surprised to not recognize some of them. The master-at-arms informed him these mysterious items were a thistle, a lowa, and a spitter, respectively, all weapons coming from Eastian peoples on the other side of the Curtain. The room also had numerous chests full of projectile weapons, shields, light armor, and thick training outfits.

"We're not going to wear those," Grigán told Léti. "You wouldn't have them in a real fight. I don't want you to develop any bad habits."

Léti nodded silently, a gesture she had grown used to in fulfilling her role as a student. She had stopped doubting the warrior's decisions a long time ago... at least those relating to her training.

"You could also kill her right away," Rey mocked. "I mean, that's what you would do in a real fight, right?"

"If we're talking about another possible reality, I would have relieved our group of your unbearable presence a long time ago."

"I've heard that our ancestors were the closest friends in the whole world," Rey continued, keeping his cool. "Rafa Derkel and Reyan the Elder. Doesn't that make you wonder? Couldn't you make an effort to like me even a little?"

“I haven’t struck you yet. That seems like sufficient proof of my affection, or at least, of my attempts at it.”

Léti had grown tired of this dead conversation and walked away to join Bowbaq. When the actor and the warrior went at each other in this kind of verbal joust, it usually took a while. To Rey’s delight, he ended up getting the last word, putting Grigán in a bad mood.

“I didn’t know there were so many kinds of weapons,” Bowbaq said sadly.

The giant was engrossed, examining a thistle. It was a sort of long-bladed dirk, each side of the blade fitted with rows of teeth. When pulled out of a successful strike, the steel must inflict atrocious wounds that were nearly impossible to treat.

“Only evil-minded people use those sorts of things,” Léti stated, trying to convince herself just as much as reassure the giant. “The only reason we’re learning to carry a weapon is to avoid becoming a victim.”

“Maybe. Maybe not...” Bowbaq responded, in his solemn manner.

He continued his tour, Léti silently following. Not long after, his eyes fell on a modest-sized painting—hardly three feet wide—but one that was teeming with detail.

His heart beat with emotion. Bowbaq exchanged a look with Léti before calling Crépel over.

“What does this canvas represent?”

“That’s King Arkane,” the intendant answered, pointing to one of the many people in the scene. “The last time he was seen, before he got kidnapped by the Loreliens. He abdicated the throne just after he was released, which happened two moons later, and with no explanation. They say this painting depicts the last time he was truly happy.”

Léti called Grigán and Rey over, and the heirs stared at the painted scene with interest. Almost 120 years earlier, an artist had accompanied his king to a small Lorelien island, sketched a few lines, and then immortalized his subjects in a painting upon his return. The exact pose was certainly an invention.

Although they were the most knowledgeable on the subject of Ji, never had the heirs heard anyone speak of it. But it was plausible.

The canvas represented the wise emissaries that traveled to the island of Ji. Standing tall with their heads held high, the eleven people posed before a rocky labyrinth that was all too familiar to the heirs. The sensitive

artist's vision rendered the scene with the necessary weight that the historic moment merited.

Rey sent Crépel off to fetch Corenn and Yan. Rife with emotion, the heirs tried to place a name with each person. Léti felt her heart throb at the sight of Tiramis, who was the only woman in the photo and must have been her ancestor. The Kaulien standing next to her had to be Yon. It wasn't hard for them to recognize Moboq of Arkary, almost as big and no less bearded than Bowbaq. They also found Rafa de Griteh and Ssa-Vez of Jezeba, who were dressed in such obviously traditional attire so as to leave no doubts about their national identity. The man in the priest's robe must have been Maz Achem of the Holy City.

Only four of the members remained unidentified. The oldest might have been Saat the Treasurer, counselor to Prince Vanamel. Without hesitation, Rey pointed at Duke Kercyan, recognizing him from the several portraits he had seen before. The other character wearing a noble cape, therefore, had to be the Goranese Prince Vanamel, which only left one: Nol the Strange. The root of it all.

Everyone thought they could read a deep sadness in his eyes. They looked on in reverie, amazed that a 120-year-old canvas could depict such a subtle detail.



“My great-grandfather, King Arkane, hid that painting as soon as he returned to Junine,” Séhane said. “My grandfather never cared much about it, and my father, unfortunately, didn't live long enough to bring his personal taste to the castle's décor. In fact, it was found only last year. It represents a scene that I hardly want to remember, so I asked that we hang it in a room I rarely visit.”

The queen had taken some free time to take a walk with Corenn along the castle's ramparts. As soon as they had started walking, the Mother had asked Séhane about the strange painting in the armory.

“Do you know where they rediscovered it?”

“I know what you are thinking, Corenn. Arkane could have hidden something else, an object that had something to do with his mysterious adventure on Ji. Sadly, the canvas was alone.”

The Mother didn't hide her disappointment. As Séhane guessed, she had counted on finding a new clue that could teach them something more about the island's secrets, and the identity of the Accuser. Yet another hope annihilated... Since there wasn't any more to say on the subject, Corenn tried to bring up another, one that was close to her heart. "Do you have any news from Kaul? I have been absent for more than three dékades and have no idea what's happened there."

"I don't have much information to offer, I'm afraid. I think that your Ancestress was ill for a few days. I haven't heard any rumors about troubles in the Matriarchy. Do you want to send a message to your friends? One of my vassals could take care of it..."

"Thank you, Séhane, for the generous offer, but that would be far too dangerous for us, for the Mothers, and even for your messenger. The Züu and the Grand Guild must have eyes and ears in Kaul by now. We should avoid any contact with our previous lives."

"You are wise, Corenn," the queen complimented. After a few moments of silence, she added, "Would you want to sit at my side at the next assembly of barons? Please don't refuse; I really need some good advice. The kings are all too young, too ambitious, and sometimes too clever for me. They will devour my beautiful country like a pack of starving wolves when I'm gone. Oh, Corenn... Junians deserve to be happy."

The Mother agreed, of course. After thinking about it, Séhane's problems were much more serious, and had farther-reaching repercussions, than the heirs' misfortunes, which really concerned only an insignificant number of humans.

At least, that's how it seemed on the surface...



After the midday meal, Corenn and Yan cloistered themselves off in one of the Broken Castle's many study halls for a new magic lesson. They took great care to make sure the room was empty, for the people of the Small Kingdoms considered magic to be a monstrosity. Séhane would have certainly never allowed her guests to be chased out, or worse burned at a stake, for their sorcery, but it was best to be discreet anyway.

Seeing the Mother's pensive expression, Yan realized she was about to pass on another fundamental principle of magic. The discipline seemed

inexhaustible. At the end of every lesson, the young man wondered what more Corenn could possibly teach him. She managed to surprise him every time.

She focused for a moment before beginning, searching for the right words. “You now know that power cannot create. You draw the strength necessary to harness your Will from within you or from your surroundings. The rest is just a battle of power between your mind and your target.” The lesson had begun.

Yan nodded slowly. He knew just as well as Corenn that it wasn’t as simple as her short speech had made it seem. She was merely summarizing to get to new material.

“What I now propose to you is that we take our definition of *mind* a little further. In fact, our definition of everything: objects, animals, humans, a speck of dust, or a star. To me, everything is the same.”

Her last comment was itself the definition. Yan didn’t make the mistake of commenting on it immediately.

“There is a likeness in all things,” the Mother repeated. “Everything is composed of the same elements. Or rather, the same magical components. Only the proportions of these elements change. Do you follow so far?”

“Of course. Magic is like cooking,” Yan answered, smiling.

“That’s quite true, actually,” Corenn conceded. “But even though we only have *four* ingredients, the combinations are infinite. And the recipes, therefore, are even more abundant.”

“*Fire* doesn’t exist in us,” Yan objected, having already understood the four ingredients Corenn was evoking.

“But of course it does. Not in the way you understand it, perhaps; there’s no little flame burning from the tips of your fingers or the ends of your hair. In reality it’s something spiritual. Something magical!

“Your entire being, as well as mine, all that exists in the universe is composed entirely of a mix of earth, wind, fire, and water. Nothing in the universe is missing one of these elements. The highest skies contain the scent of the deep earth. The unfathomable depths of the ocean can set themselves ablaze with their own fire. It’s only a question of Will.

“Earth is everything material, palpable, or the body of everything. It’s also the collection of all forces that join and separate things. When you knocked over your shell, you were unleashing your Will on its earth component. Earth is my specialty. It will be yours too.

“Wind is the spirit. The soul, thought. It’s also the most complex of the disciplines. The most mysterious. Who can possibly claim to intimately know human nature, the animal mind, what the soul becomes during sleep, or after death? Only magicians who know such things could declare themselves a specialist of the wind element.

“Water is life, the indispensable element that gives movement to your body, and allows your mind to reason. Without water, you could just as well call this table or this wall *Yan*. They can’t move or think on their own.”

“According to your words, I gather that it’s possible to heal people with magic, is that right?”

“Some claim to have done so. I’ve never risked it, for fear of making the wounds worse. And the languor that accompanies such spells must be unforgiving.”

Yan pushed the subject aside for the moment. Corenn wasn’t through with her presentation.

“And fire?”

“Fire,” the Mother repeated, solemnly. “Well... fire is the tendency all things have to become something else. Fire changes a baby into a child, and then a child into a man. Fire makes you age. Fire kills you. Fire transforms your body into nourishment for the rest of the world, once you devour yourself with your own fire. Fire is time’s most dutiful agent. It’s the most dangerous of the disciplines, Yan. It’s what we call *black magic*.”



Grigán had asked one of Séhane’s guards to be Léti’s opponent for an exercise. The idea didn’t exactly please the Junian, but a request from one of the queen’s guests was like an order from Séhane herself. He accepted under the condition that they both put on the heavy training gear.

Swords weren’t the Junians’ preferred weapon; they were much better known for their cavalry’s skilled use of the lance, but for the exercise, the man agreed to arm himself with one of the Goranese broadswords, similar to Léti’s. Thus the lesson began.

Léti easily repelled the guard’s first two or three timid assaults, and Grigán pressured the man to be more aggressive. At the beginning, the young woman was content to merely defend herself, while watching her adversary’s maneuvers, just as she had learned.



She feigned weakness when she countered his attack at her legs. *Sharp mind.* The man fell into the trap and focused his assault there.

After a few of these exchanges, Léti stopped faking a lack of flexibility and simply sidestepped the blade. *Firm footing.* The broadsword still grazed her calf, but she had learned to not fear injury. She agilely lunged and pointed her blade toward the startled guard. *Steady hand.*

Grigán thanked the Junian and left him to his work, despite the man's pleas for a chance to avenge his loss. Rey and Bowbaq excitedly congratulated Léti, who was equally happy. Proud. Now, she could defend herself. Now, she could protect her friends and family.

Grigán didn't let her gloat for long. He grabbed his curved sword and asked her to get ready. Léti obeyed, grateful to the warrior for his teaching.

She handled her second combat with less ease than the first, since her opponent was more difficult. Skilled in the same techniques, Léti and Grigán launched few attacks, trying to gauge each other with small sidesteps and brief collisions between their blades.

*Each strike should have a goal, Grigán had said. Parry or counterattack. The rest does nothing more than uselessly tire.* Since they both followed this rule, the combat would be won by the one who had an attack that was surprising or quick.

The warrior's experience was the decisive factor. He whirled his blade in a motion so terrifying that Léti instinctively held up her broadsword to protect herself, even though Grigán's blade was still too distant to pose a threat. The moment she put up her sword, the warrior brutally crashed into her with his shoulder, knocking her weapon out of her hand. Léti found herself flat on the ground and disarmed.

"It's cruel to do this to her now," said Rey, who had been watching the scene intently. "You could have let her savor her victory a little."

Grigán responded in a neutral tone, "Life is more like this. In a real combat, we don't celebrate."

He reached his hand out to Léti and helped her up. The young woman wasn't mad at the warrior, as his teaching had already proved its worth. She was mad at herself. And she used that anger to renew her resolution to keep improving.

But Rey had more objections. He took Léti's defeat personally.

"Worse, it's not an even fight. Your blade is longer by a foot. And her broadsword is too heavy! What do you expect her to do with this club

meant for burly brutes?”

Grigán didn’t respond immediately, but pulled the actor to the side so that Léti couldn’t hear them.

“You’re trying to do the right thing, Reyan, but you are interfering with her training. Léti should figure these things out on her own. It’s an experience we can’t just give to her; she has to earn it. I didn’t choose her weapon. She should learn the difference.”

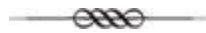
“How is she supposed to compare it to something else if that broadsword is all she knows?”

Having delivered his strongest evidence, Rey turned his back to Grigán and left the room, to the warrior’s great relief. The actor reappeared shortly after, this time with his rapier, which he put in Léti’s hands.

“Try this. This is what I call a sword. At least you don’t have to be as strong as Bowbaq to handle it. Just a bit of dexterity and speed.”

Léti turned toward Grigán, who shrugged his shoulders and then nodded. She gripped the light Lorelien sword, and immediately recognized the advantages of such a blade. Longer, lighter, sharper, requiring less strength. It was all that she needed.

She thanked Rey with a charming smile. The actor often boasted about his independence, his individualism, but he had learned to appreciate the feeling of friendship.



A crowd of barons began arriving at the Broken Castle on the sixth day of the Hunter’s décade. From then on, Séhane had a lot less time for her friends. She held an endless string of audiences, from polite visitations to official meetings. She allowed herself only a few, rare moments of free time, which she spent with Corenn, discussing thorny political matters and the queen’s own succession.

The queen had been ignoring the problem for too long. Granted, it was difficult to contemplate her own death, but the kingdom’s prosperity depended on the stability of its government. If the succession terms weren’t drawn up and approved by the people and the barons, Junine would soon find itself in the midst of a civil war, a conflict that could spread to the rest of the Baronies. It would mark the end of the treaties. It would mark the end of her life’s work.

Deep down, Séhane had always thought the king would outlive her. He would wed another woman, and she would give him children. But Urio had left her alone, eleven years earlier. Since then, she had so much to take care of that she didn't have the time to solve this major problem: Who should get the crown?

"I've often considered copying you, Corenn. Copying the Matriarchy. Have the people choose their leaders. In reality, that's the fairest solution, but the barons would oppose it with all their strength. They're not ready yet. And it's better for Junine to be part of the Small Kingdoms rather than to become the *Junian dissidents*."

Corenn agreed with Séhane on every point. The queen had given the problem enough thought to avoid making an errant decision. Unfortunately, she hadn't found a good one either, which kept her distracted and distressed. Séhane would have made an extraordinary Kaulienne Ancestress.

"I've put my decision off for too long. My people are worried, and the barons are growing impatient. They won't leave without an answer this time. And I don't blame them..."

"What are your options, Séhane? What decisions are actually possible?"

"I can designate one of the barons as my successor, but the Junians would never accept any baron as their ruler. Or I could pass on the crown to one of my own Junians, in which case the barons would be the unhappy ones. No matter what I decide, the Small Kingdoms are in danger of erupting into chaos after I'm gone..."

"But what is *your* preference? Do you have a name in mind, someone who is worthy?"

"Yes, his name is Perbas. He's been my regent for more than fifteen years. He's an honest, passionate man, and just as knowledgeable about the kingdom's affairs as I am. More so, perhaps. He has a son who seems to be following in his footsteps. The ideal candidate. But how do I convince my peers to accept him? He would need at least a few years in power before he would dare declare himself an equal among the barons. Yet he'll need the courage to do so right away."

An idea started forming in Corenn's mind. She had a way to show Séhane her gratitude.

“Junians are a rather superstitious people, aren’t they?” she asked with a scheming look. “And the barons, too, I believe?”

“Not one of them would ever break a maol tree branch, Corenn. What are you getting at?”

“Introduce Perbas as your successor *chosen by the gods*. That will shelter him from attacks long enough for him to toughen up, since no one will dare question his right to the throne.”

“A ruse?” There was surprise in Séhane’s voice, but her expression was pensive. It took only a few moments for the queen to evaluate the plan. *It wasn’t all that bad*, she thought. *In fact, it might be a great idea.*

“I thought you were the guardian of traditions, Corenn,” she teased. “Isn’t this idea slightly disrespectful?”

“*Even misers must eat*, Séhane. I’ve often overstepped the Matriarchy’s laws with the sole aim of making others respect them. You wouldn’t be doing it for personal gain; you would be doing it for the good of your people.”

“I envy your confidence. I’m the old woman, but you’re the one who’s speaking wisely and thoughtfully.”

“I don’t know if it’s wisdom, but these last few dékades have been more trying than an entire lifetime. They’ve made me see the world differently. It is not something to envy, believe me.”

Corenn couldn’t tell her about their expedition to Ji, about the strange portal leading to another world, or the mystery of the demonic children. But Séhane knew the rest of the story, and that knowledge was more than enough for her to understand the distraught expression that sometimes flashed across Corenn’s face, the one that surfaced when she thought no one was looking.



It didn’t take long to prepare for the ruse. Séhane first had a long conversation with Perbas, and when she was finished, the regent left the room as pale as milk. It was the first time she had spoken to him about her plan. Before she could take it any further, she had to figure out if he would accept the throne.

The Junian asked for a night to think on it, and came to find Séhane the next morning, as early as etiquette would allow, to accept the honor and

responsibility. The queen had done such a good job making his natural patriotism resonate that he felt if he were to refuse, he would have committed the worst sort of treason. Nevertheless, he insisted that Séhane promise to stay alive for as long as possible.

It remained to be seen how they would make his promotion seem to be blessed by the gods. Early on, Corenn rejected the idea of paying some unscrupulous divine figure, or theoretician, who would repeat any story they told him. It would be too easy to see through that. Besides, she had thought of a much better solution instead.

Some of the barons always traveled with their own astrologist or personal soothsayer. To give their message weight, Corenn and Séhane had to use one of these men.

“That’s impossible,” the queen objected to Corenn’s idea. “No matter what reward we can offer them, they will only end up selling the information to their master. The risk is too great.”

It was then that Corenn revealed her magical powers to her friend. Far from being surprised, Séhane immediately understood the plan. *It could actually work*, the queen thought.

Together they finalized the details. They had only to await the assembly of barons, which took place that very evening. Séhane required the presence of all her peers for a declaration of the utmost importance. Even though this demand was late in coming, everyone, filled with curiosity, rushed to the Broken Castle.

Séhane, Corenn, and Perbas didn’t join the large audience until after everyone had already arrived. The more ambitious barons resented the presence of the regent and this new counselor at their assembly, having forgotten that they, themselves, were often accompanied by one, two, even three individuals. The Baronies numbered nineteen, but more than forty people were now impatiently staring at Séhane.

“My friends, peers of the Small Kingdoms,” she declared solemnly. “I’m sure you have guessed the reason I brought you together today. Naturally, we are here to settle once and for all the conditions for succession. As you well know, Junine’s stability, as well as that of all the Baronies, is at stake.”

She took a long pause, letting the official nature of her pronouncement settle in. The nobles in the hall were hanging on her every word.

“Until now, no baron has died without an heir. Soon, I will have the sad privilege to be the first. But the treaties must survive beyond Arkane’s line. Junine must continue its history of being *with* and *for* the Baronies. And Junine must also stay *Junian*.”

As expected, a few barons shouted out in violent protest. And while the majority of them respected the treaties as much as Séhane, there were still some who had hoped to inherit Junine and its riches. The queen had refused so many attempts at corruption these last few moons. However, she wouldn’t allow herself to choose one of the barons as her successor. Those who had vied for the throne had understood her maxim that “Junine should stay Junian.”

“Peers of the Small Kingdoms, hear me,” Séhane implored. “The treaties are fragile. After all, they rest only on a simple military alliance. If one of you came to own a territory two times as large, producing two times the wealth, do you really think that things would stay the same?”

Only a few shook their heads, but they were the wisest among them. The rest, Séhane still had to convince.

“Our common army would be imbalanced. The men of this new ‘Grand Barony’ would be more numerous and would make up a stronger presence along our borders. The other Baronies, less integrated, would become less interested in the common cause, until they would eventually retreat to their homes. Someday, the Yussa would cross the Louvelle, and there might be no one left to repel them. That is not what I want. That is not what you want.”

Her words echoed in the hall, and all eyes were steadied on her. She had captivated them. Corenn shuddered at the mention of Yussa. They were Aleb’s mercenary troops, Grigán’s personal enemy. *Mother Eurydis, the heirs had so many enemies*, Corenn thought.

“I choose Perbas of Ubresa, the kingdom’s regent and grand cleric of the Baronies, as the legitimate successor to the rights and responsibility of Junine’s crown. At my death, he will take the name Perbas of Junine and his line will inherit the throne. Barons, you know his valor and loyalty. From today, I ask that you treat him like one of our peers.”

“He’s not even nobility!” protested Adémir, the king of Phar. “You can’t give him the throne!”

“The crown of Junine will make him noble enough,” Séhane responded with specious logic.

“How can you do this?” Adémir persisted. “Give Junine to some beggar! I formally oppose it!”

“The treaties give you no right to interfere in my kingdom’s affairs,” Séhane curtly reminded them all. “You will either recognize my decision as a peer of the Baronies, or leave the alliance.”

The king swept his gaze across the room, looking for support. Some were ready to follow him in his rebellion, if only they could find more solid ground on which to form their objection.

“Let us consult the omens! If the gods favor him, I will bow to your chosen king.”

He didn’t say what he would do if the gods didn’t favor Perbas. Everything was unfolding as they had planned. Corenn started to concentrate. She wasn’t yet sure what she would have to do, but she was ready.

The king of Phar signaled to one of the members of his entourage. An old woman walked to the center of the crowd. She was covered in wrinkles and completely bald, which made her look like an overripe pear from Wastille. She awkwardly waved to the assembly and pulled out four pieces of ivory from a small leather purse embroidered with arcane runes.

Divination by Ithare dice. Very well. *This will be easy*, Corenn said to herself.

The soothsayer knelt down and chanted various incantations that were supposed to draw the gods’ attention. With surprising dexterity, she placed the four dice between her two thumbs and waited for a question.

“Is it just that Perbas ascend the throne of Junine?” Adémir asked.

It was a clever question. The symbolic arrangement of dice for “absolute yes” was rarely thrown. Many other combinations would have middling responses, which would be difficult to interpret. Corenn was sure the soothsayer would do her best to please her master.

She threw the dice abruptly, and the small ivory cubes rolled on the ground. Corenn had never sent her Will so quickly, but she was able to straighten two of the cubes without anyone noticing.

“Twice the Twins, and a triangle,” the king of Galen announced to the crowd, as he leaned over to see. “The gods give their blessing.”

“The triangle represents fire,” Adémir objected. “The *demons* are in favor. And wind is on the earth die. The situation is temporary, and demands more thorough reflection.”

Corenn had trouble believing that these kings would make political decisions on the throw of some dice, but they all seemed to take the soothsayer's talents seriously. Finally, someone asked for the soothsayer's interpretation.

The old woman remained still. A strange expression crept up her face, like a scowl she was unsuccessfully trying to hold back. Her mouth opened, letting out a trickle of saliva, and then a groan rose in her throat.

The people closest to her stepped back, while Corenn did the opposite and rushed to her aid. The Mother shook her, even slapped her, but the old woman did not respond, staying motionless.

Suddenly, she gripped Corenn's shoulder with surprising vigor and shoved her face close to Corenn's. She stared into her eyes and spoke with venom in her voice. The sound that came from her mouth was that of a man tired by age and deformed by hatred.

She spat, "The heirs are going to die... soon. You will all die..."

She pronounced this last phrase with a hint of madness, and finished with a horrifying and ridiculous laugh. Two men finally came to help Corenn, who couldn't release herself from the old woman's steel grip. They unclasped her hands from Corenn and hurried the old woman to another room. Clearly, she had lost her mind.

The barons whispered, "What did she mean? Séhane has no children. Did she mean Perbas? But then, why say the heirs?"

No one had enjoyed the scene, not even those who could use it to their benefit.

Corenn was shocked, knowing all too well whom those words were meant for.



The days flowed by, and the heirs still hadn't heard anything from the author of the mysterious letter. Maybe the journey from Mestèbe to Junine took more than six days; that is, if the stranger were really hiding out in the Rominian city. In any case, the heirs were growing impatient. Didn't their message say, "We can help you"?

They tried to keep their minds off the strange event at the assembly of barons. The old woman's trance hadn't been some trick, as she still hadn't recovered her wits. Corenn desperately wanted to believe the soothsayer



had been drugged by an excellent herbal specialist, someone who wanted their plans to backfire or to deter them from their quest. She was searching for a plausible scenario, something a mere mortal could do.

Deep down she was afraid, though. To be able to possess someone like that could mean their enemy had immeasurable powers. Powers that were so dangerous they almost made the Züu seem laughable. Perhaps their foe could see them now through some powerful lens of magic. There was no way to know. All they could do was wait, and keep waiting.

True to form, Corenn and Grigán took advantage of the downtime to make some progress with their students. The warrior managed to teach Bowbaq a few moves with a staff and a mace, although the giant endured the exercises with a pitiable resignation.

As for Rey, he kept himself busy playing dice. He ended up making a few enemies among Séhane's guards, winning a few too many large bets. None of the heirs could figure out why he persisted in playing for money when he had enough gold to buy himself a palace.

No fools, Grigán and Corenn also suspected him of making friends with some of Séhane's handmaidens. Some giggles here and winks there were more telling than a signed confession. The heirs didn't give a margolin's ass how Rey spent his evenings, so long as he didn't bring them or Séhane any trouble. Fortunately for Rey, the pervading sense of morals in the Baronies was loose in this respect.

The Day of the Horse, the ninth day of the Hunter's dékade, came to break the uncomfortable laziness everyone had settled into. It was a special day: Léti's sixteenth new year.

The young woman spent the decidays before the apogee praying and meditating, as the Eurydian cult encouraged. Léti wasn't overly devout, but she always followed the rituals surrounding the new year scrupulously. They were meant as a sort of self-assessment, an evaluation of one's actions over the past year, and a chance to decide on improvements for the coming year, with the Goddess's help, of course.

Léti returned from her self-imposed isolation looking sad. Not much good had come to her this past year. She couldn't see how she would do better in the future.

Despite her gloomy mood, her friends had decreed that it was her day. They all made such an effort to make her happy that in the end, she forgot her troubles for a while.

Rey offered her a performance of the classic comedy from the Upper Kingdoms, *Favel's Misfortune*. There weren't many lines in the play. It mainly relied on the main character's ludicrous expressions. The actor had eagerly roped Yan and Bowbaq into the cast, providing them with only brief explanations on their roles, and the end result was a play that had very little resemblance to the original script. Rey had mastered his role superbly, and combined with Yan and Bowbaq's clumsy improvisations, they managed to produce their desired effect: bring Léti to tears of laughter.

Next came the presents. It was a Junian custom for friends to offer gifts to those celebrating their new year, as a sign of affection. Séhane told her friends this little custom a few days before, and it had given them all the same idea. They surprised Léti by filling her arms with presents: some of them masked with wrapping, and others not.

Séhane gave Léti the painting of the emissaries, which had been hanging in the armory until then. The young woman would spend long moments every day contemplating it. In her eyes, the canvas was priceless, and she melted in thanks. But the gift giving had only just started.

Rey gave her a magnificent Lorelien rapier that resembled the one he had lent her before. Grigán examined the weapon apprehensively, but in the end could only agree: It was a beautiful sword crafted by a fastidious artisan. Despite Léti's joy, the actor avoided Corenn's disapproving looks.

Next, she examined the little horse figurine that Bowbaq had given her. It was a beautiful object, and she thanked him sincerely. The giant tried to explain, muddling his words the whole way, that the object wasn't the real gift. It symbolized a promise, he said. He would domesticate any animal she chose. The young woman knew how long and difficult the process could be, even for an erjak. And she knew Bowbaq would build a strong and undying bond between her and the animal. It was a wonderful gift.

Corenn offered her a thick book that was beautifully embroidered and solidly bound. Léti flipped through it curiously, but there weren't many illustrations.

"It's beautiful, Aunt Corenn. But I don't know how to read..."

"Ask Yan to teach you! I'm sure he'll find the writing interesting."

Léti nodded with a smile. Corenn had given her two good reasons to learn. Her aunt knew what she was doing, and she always seemed to get what she aimed for.

Next, the young woman opened up the heavy burlap sack that Grigán had offered her. She couldn't hold back a shriek of joy when she discovered what was inside. Grigán had made her a black-leather outfit like his, minus the patches and twenty years of wear and tear. He had been working on the surprise for a long time. He had consulted one of the castle's tailors to estimate Léti's measurements, and then transmitted the specifications to one of the city's tanners, who completed the difficult order.

The young woman admired the way the artisan had embedded plates of metal in the leather, reinforced the seams, and worked hard to make the outfit solid and sleek. She couldn't resist the urge to try it on immediately and slipped it on over her clothes.

"You're a real warrior now," Yan teased.

"She could pass as your daughter dressed like that," Rey remarked. "Any chance that was intentional?"

"I just wanted to give her something useful," Grigán responded, defensively.

Still, the warrior blushed to his ears. The heirs had never seen him like that before. Léti gave him a warm thank-you and turned to the packet she had saved for last: Yan's.

Her hands were almost trembling as she untied the fabric wrapped around a little object. Things between them had been much better since Léti's conversation with Corenn. Nevertheless, the young man was still somehow distant. He had been upset with her on the day of the Promise and hadn't shown any regrets about it. He was her friend, but wasn't he more than just that?

As she opened the packet, she discovered a necklace. The links were finely crafted and from which hung a singular medallion: a shiny opal with a little golden scroll encased inside it.

"It's pure silver," Rey informed her. "What? Yan, you would have never told her yourself; I'm doing you a favor!"

Léti's eyes welled up, and her voice was shaky as she thanked Yan, which embarrassed him.

"How did you get the scroll inside the opal?"

"Well, sort of by magic, actually," he answered awkwardly.

It was the first time he had shown his power to someone other than Corenn, who hadn't known about this.

Corenn gave him an admiring nod. At this point in his training, Yan was already capable of some surprising things.

Crépel's arrival interrupted them. Only something important could bring him to disturb Séhane.

"Majesty. A Maz from Mestèbe requests to see you. I think she's the one you've been waiting for."

Hearing the news, the heirs all jumped up as if they were one being. They were all anxious to meet the woman as soon as possible.

Léti didn't have the chance to ask Yan her second question. But she felt better when she realized it was probably better that way.

From that day on, she would dream about what Yan could have possibly written to her on that golden scroll inside her medallion.



Symbolically, Séhane received the visitor in the room where the surviving emissaries to Ji had first reunited a year after their return. Arkane of Junine, Tiramis and Yon of Kaul, Maz Achem, Reyan the Elder, Rafa Derkel, and the wise Moboq were today represented by as many descendants, suffering from the same curse.

The stranger had refused to give her name, but the chamberlains, alert to the possibility of a visitor from Mestèbe, reacted quickly and informed the queen without delay. The heirs waited impatiently to meet this potential new member.

Their interview with the newcomer had to be kept a secret, and Séhane had sent away the guards. She counted on Grigán for protection, if the need arose. Though there wasn't really much danger, the warrior proudly accepted the duty.

The door opened to reveal Crépel, who held it open for the visitor, and then Crépel left without a word, and all eyes fell on the new arrival.

If she wasn't a Maz, she sure had the look. A long frock with symbols of the Goddess Eurydis covered her from head to toe. Her face was hidden by a dour, colorless Ithare mask, and her blonde hair rested on her neck, held back by a delicate ribbon. She wasn't wearing any jewelry, and she was silent.

Séhane walked toward her with a greeting, "Welcome, speak without fear. We are all friends here."

Despite her confident announcement, Grigán followed the queen closely, thinking it reckless to leave her exposed to this foreigner.

“Are you our correspondent from Mestèbe?” Corenn asked.

The Maz turned toward the Mother, and thought for a moment before responding, “Yes, it is I.”

“Understand, Maz, that we must take every precaution. We need to check to make sure you’re telling the truth. I don’t want to offend, but what did your message say?”

Seeing the stranger’s silence, Corenn added: “We all read it. We are all involved. Have no fear.”

“Your Majesty, if the name Ji rings like a curse in your mind, we can be of service to one another. Send a reply with the bird that I hope has survived the journey.’ That’s what I wrote.”

“Welcome, Maz Lana. That is your name, correct? You are Maz Achem’s descendant. An heir.”

Corenn knew the list of heirs so well that she had easily identified the stranger, even after only spending a few moments with her. And that was without the Maz having ever participated in the reunions on the Day of the Owl.

Still suspicious, Lana stayed silent.

“According to my information, you were killed in Ith,” Corenn continued. “By the Züü, I am guessing. I am happy to see that there was no truth to the story.”

Bowbaq added, “We escaped them too.”

Surprised, Lana asked, “You were all attacked by the Züü?”

Grigán responded, “Once or twice.”

Léti clarified, “I killed one. Rey killed two. Bowbaq, three, with his snow lion. Grigán’s already up to seven.” She pointed to each of them as introduction.

The warrior reminded her, “I don’t want you to keep a count like that.”

Lana stared at each of the heirs who surrounded her, wondering if she had fallen in with a group of madmen. These people seemed violent, far from following the Eurydis’s Moral. Inexplicably, she felt safe with them.

“I am Lana of Lioner of Ith,” she announced calmly. “It is true: I am Maz Achem’s descendant, and happy to finally find friends.”

They all commended her and introduced themselves. Hundreds of questions burned their lips. But for the moment, they simply tasted the

sweet joy of this reunion, a joy that felt... familial.

Only Rey kept his distance, and he gave his reason when it was his turn to introduce himself.

"I would only like to make sure of one little thing. To see that the face underneath that mask isn't a painted skull."

"It's a religious mask!" Léti said, offended at his suggestion.

"It is also a mask for mourning," Lana added. "But this young man is right. I should reveal myself, if only to show my respect for Her Majesty."

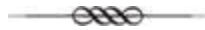
She untied the ribbon that attached the mask and pulled it off, finally exposing her face and letting her hair down.

She was a divine beauty. Prettier even than Léti, Yan conceded to himself. But her extra charm came from the years she had on Léti; the Maz bore the look of a more mature woman. Léti would have the same look one day.

"Reyan! So you don't have some joke for us this time?" Amused, Grigán observed the astonished look on the actor's face. The Lorelien tried to recover his countenance, but it was too late. The heirs had read the emotions plainly on his face. Surprise. Admiration. Desire.

"I hope you will not be angry with me, Lana," he stammered awkwardly.

From that day on, Yan felt closer to the actor, for Rey had just fallen in love.



They had many things to discuss and decided to start with Lana's story, before the rest of them briefly recounted their own. The Maz's tale was enough to fuel their conversation until late into the night. She had stunning information to share.

She told them about her passionate search into her ancestor's past. How she found out about Maz Achem's puzzling experience on Ji. About how Achem had come back to Ith a changed man: a furious reformist of Eurydis's teachings.

"He wanted the Eurydis cult to be more expansionist, more aggressive. He felt that the conversion of the known world's civilizations to the Goddess's Moral was happening far too slowly."

“I don’t see how that alone could have justified taking his title from him,” Corenn remarked, who was familiar with each emissary’s history.

“Achem advocated a crusade. A crusade for Eurydis. A crusade against the demonist cults. Can you imagine a Maz asking the Grand Temple to raise an army in order to fight a war with the followers of K’lur, Phiras, and the other dark gods?”

The heirs stared at her, horrified. Lana had just let them in on a very important secret, one that lined up with one of their most pessimistic theories. The place on the other side of the portal was indeed the land of demons.

For a fleeting moment, they all considered sharing what they knew about Ji, the portal, and the other world, but quickly remembered that they were bound to their oath, the promise. Besides, they had only known Lana for a few decadays. Perhaps later on...

Lana could sense their turmoil, but she continued with her story. She had yet to reveal the most important part. “I didn’t discover much more through my research. With time, I lost all interest. Until the day my parents fell deathly ill.”

She let the silence hang in the air, not only out of respect for the deceased but also to compose herself. “On his deathbed, my father made me promise to burn Maz Achem’s journal if it ever fell into my hands.”

The heirs stared at the Maz, hanging on her next words. This latest bit of information provided so much hope that no one dared ask the question they were all burning to ask. Séhane, who was less interested than the others until now, took the initiative. “Have you found the journal?”

“No. I’m not even sure it exists. I thought I would find it in Mestèbe, but I was wrong.”

“How can you be sure it contains anything of interest anyway?” Grigán asked. “It’s quite possible Achem didn’t write anything about Ji.”

“Reports from Ith say that he read a few passages from his journal to the Emaz priests. Supposedly, that’s what prompted his expulsion from the Temple.”

“It could just be a bunch of theoretical ranting,” the warrior countered.

“Do you really think so?”

Grigán didn’t answer. He wanted to believe this journal was their best hope just as much as the others did, but he was afraid to be let down again.

Corenn's instinct told her that it held the answers to all their questions. Maz Achem had recorded everything, breaking his promise of silence. That would mean that for 118 years, their promise was an orphan, abandoned from the start by one of those who had first sworn it. "Mestèbe wasn't your only hope, was it?"

"You're right, Corenn. I know who can tell me whether it exists and where it's located."

"Who, besides a dead Maz?" asked Rey.

"A god."

"Right, of course!" the actor joked. "Why didn't we think of that sooner! Maybe he could even introduce us to Eurydis. We could empty a few bottles of wine over a game of dice. Why not?"

"I'm serious," Lana continued. "It's obvious you don't have faith, but there are gods living in our world, hidden among us. That is a fact, Reyan."

"My mistake! If you also have his exact address, I'll gladly follow you there. I've seen so many strange things with this group that nothing can surprise me anymore. I hope it won't be too expensive at least?"

"I'm talking about *Usul*."

Rey became serious again. He hadn't heard many positive legends about Usul.

"The god of the Guoris people," Grigán commented. "The Land of Beauty."

"Have you been there before?" Lana asked hopefully.

"I have a friend there, but the native people don't let anyone set foot on their Sacred Island. Assuming a god really lives there, you could never see him."

"We must try," Corenn decided. "Lana is a Maz. That might impress them."

"It's not like they're a bunch of naïve savages," Grigán explained. "Even though they don't travel much, they have almost as many warships as the Loreliens. The Sacred Island is better defended than the Great Island itself. It's too dangerous."

"And assuming we can meet Usul, by some miracle, and that he really does know the answers, who's to say he would give them to us?" Rey asked.

"You're right, Rey, there are lots of holes," Lana conceded. "But I don't see any other solution. I need your help."



They considered the soundness of her observation. Before Lana showed up, they were at a loss. The hope she brought into the picture, however small, and however dangerous, at least offered them some small chance.

“I vote that we go,” Corenn decided. “Many of our questions have remained unanswered for too long. If we manage to meet with Usul, he will also be able to tell us our enemy’s name.”

The heirs nodded silently in agreement.

Their quest was about to become even more difficult.



A shadow soared through the night. It could have immediately arrived at its destination, but enjoyed prolonging the trip. It hadn't tasted such freedom for too long. It flew along the Median Sea's waves, plunging under the water at times, never slowing its speed, never making a ripple. The shadow had not yet taken a physical form. It was only a spirit.

The shadow was incapable of appreciating the stunning spectacle of the waves that extended to the horizon. To the shadow, it was simply a new surrounding. Stranger than ones it had seen before, but not more beautiful. To the shadow everything was ugly and sad; there was no other way of seeing. There may have been a time when it could have seen more—colors, beauty—but that was before, in some distant past. That time was no more.

The shadow glided above the dark sea, cleaving the night sky with a breathtaking speed. Already, the surroundings were changing. It was nearing its target. The horizon rose and became solid earth. The shadow slowed down to relish the time. It flew over human constructions, and in an instant it heard the thoughts of thousands of mortals, and then scornfully rejected them. They were responsible. Masters and slaves at the same time. The shadow hated them all.

It flew over forests and mountains, trails and rivers, villages and cities. As a game, it followed the contours of the hills, descending and climbing without ever touching the ground. It flew over a troop of wild aurochs, as if they didn't exist. The shadow didn't know anything about wild aurochs, and cared even less. Even from twenty leagues away, it could still hear the beasts' distraught whimpering following its visit. Irritating. So as it flew away, it killed them all with a single thought.

The shadow felt surprised, a strange feeling. These efforts tired it. Its power diminished; its flight became more difficult. It had not imagined that it was so fragile and now redoubled its efforts. It had to hurry to finish its mission, to return to its friend.

The spirit then transported directly to its destination, hoping to save strength. This was faulty thinking. It was tired, and now sleep was calling. Fortunately, it would soon be finished with its mission. It listened to a few human spirits, drawing enough strength from them to stay awake.

It went through a two-foot-thick wall without difficulty, leaving no trace of its passing. It crossed three, five, nine other walls, and finally reached the best part of its mission.

The shadow hated all humans. It leaned over one who was sleeping.

It knew that it didn't have enough strength to kill them all with a thought, so it materialized, choosing a shape that was small enough to fit in the human-sized building yet strong enough to defeat them. It chose the first shape that came to mind.

Reality brutally imposed its limits. The new shape groaned loudly at the vile human world, leaned over the sleeping body, and broke its neck with a single swipe. The human had not woken, and never would.

The shape took a heavy step toward the door and ripped it off its hinges. A human standing behind it screamed in terror. It wasn't one of its targets, one who didn't need to be killed tonight, but the shape attacked him anyway, crushing his head between its eight clawed fingers. The man's fear and suffering gave the shadow strength, and it celebrated with a satisfied gurgle in its throat.

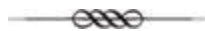
Other humans soon appeared. Some were the enemies, but there were others too. They cried out and fled. The shape had to kill them all. Tonight would be a true banquet of fear and suffering.

Something smacked it in the back. The shape turned toward it, spinning its claws in the air. But the claws didn't find their mark. The human assailing it had dodged the blows and launched another attack. This time cutting off the shape's hand. But the shape instantly grew it back and then added a third arm.

All this effort tired the shadow, and it became dreary. The human hit it twice more before it could react and push back with a violent kick. Other humans were attacking now, this time from behind. The shadow wished it had chosen another form, and added another eye to the back of its head, and a tail sprang from its back. But now it didn't have enough energy to repair itself and keep the humans at bay at the same time.

It was tired. It needed to sleep. These humans were a nuisance.

It dematerialized and fled back to the sea. It hadn't rested enough for this mission. It would return. Each day that went by strengthened it. It would return.



Corenn didn't let Léti out of the room until the sounds of battle had died away. But those cries of terror were replaced by others that were just as

cruel, just as sad: “The queen is dead! The queen is dead!”

Léti dashed into the hallway as soon as her aunt unlocked the door. She wasn’t going to forgive her aunt anytime soon. Corenn had intentionally bolted the door and refused to open it for her niece, while in the hall, sounds of clashing steel, shouts, and beastly growls had filled the air. Yan, Grigán, and the others could have been fighting for their lives, but Corenn had imprisoned her in that room.

What she saw in the hallway only confirmed her fears. Grigán was standing in front of the queen’s bedroom door, half-dressed, his curved blade in hand. He was holding his left arm, moaning in pain, but there was no blood. A broken arm!

Bowbaq was there, too. Morbidly fascinated, he was contemplating the corpse of one of the queen’s guards whose head had been... crushed. Léti turned away before she gagged.

Yan arrived on the scene almost at the same time as Léti. He first checked on the room she was sharing with her aunt to make sure they were alive. Corenn and Maz Lana arrived soon after him.

Rey came last, well after the others. He had been in the handmaidens’ wing, and the news of Séhane’s death was slow to reach that part of the castle.

The heirs studied the scene dejectedly, both terrified of the attack and relieved to be mourning only one death. Intendants, chamberlains, and all sorts of castle servants crowded in front of Séhane’s bedroom. They briefly entered one by one. All exited to tears. Corenn was the only heir brave enough to see the queen. After leaving her chambers, the heirs saw the Mother weep for the first time.

“What the hell happened here?” Rey asked, approaching the guard’s body.

Grigán and Bowbaq, the only heirs who had witnessed the fight, stared at each other silently. Other guards had fought the... *thing*. They were now lost in the crowd, or perhaps they had gone mad.

“Let’s get out of here,” the warrior said, still clutching his pained arm. “Things are going to get complicated. We’ll explain later. When I’ve had time to understand it better myself.”

The heirs went straight to their rooms and got their packs together. No one misunderstood Grigán’s order. His meaning was clear: *Let’s get out of Junine*.

Lana was the only one who stayed behind, standing in front of the queen's bedroom. No one doubted that this murder was related to the history of Ji. So, Lana thought, *this is what's in store for me someday? My neck snapped in my sleep? Wise Eurydis, why so much suffering? Why keep on fighting, relentlessly, when death always wins in the end?*

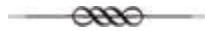
"Hurry, Lana," a voice called out. "If you're late, Grigán will make you row the boat all the way to Great Island."

She turned, and smiled at Rey. He could still find strength to joke around in a time like this. Or perhaps he felt he had to.

The actor had come back to get her. He cared about her fate. Maybe that's all there was to life. The affection of others.

"I'm right behind you," she said.

Right up until he had asked, she was undecided if she would flee with them. But then the words came out of her without even thinking. Her decision was final: She had just tied her fate to the heirs' quest.



Confusion reigned at the Broken Castle, and the heirs were able to leave without any trouble. Their escape went against all logic. All the exits should have been blocked, all the rooms searched, everyone's identity checked—but the Junians succumbed to their pain and let chaos rule.

The guards gathered here and there in the hallways, in the mess halls, in the towers, to hear accounts from the rare few who had actually *seen* it. Rumors gathered steam in the dark corridors. Junine didn't need more footmen tonight; they needed exorcists and sorcerer-hunters.

The heirs hardly spoke. Back at the castle, the horns sounded to announce the queen's death. The Junians left their homes and began to crowd the streets, wearing their sadness and curiosity on their faces. No one seemed to know anything. Old age had finally killed her, they figured. Soon, that's what everyone would be saying in the rest of the Baronies, and then in the Lower Kingdoms, until the word would spread to all the known kingdoms. Only two or three guards would go on telling their strange story, which no one would believe until a century later, when the story finally became a legend.

Once again, confusion in the streets helped the heirs to make their escape. Getting to the harbor seemed to go quickly. A few Junians thought

it strange that this small group was rushing away from the castle, carrying weapons and baggage. But the townspeople let them pass—if these people were guilty of some crime, someone would have already stopped them, they figured. The heirs sped away into the night.

Several times, Bowbaq froze in the street to look down some shadowed alley. He would then turn to Grigán, who would invariably respond, “It’s nothing. It’s gone.” The giant would then keep walking as cautiously as possible. Yan noticed that he hadn’t put down his mace since leaving Séhane’s room. The fact that this profoundly pacifist man felt such a need to protect himself scared the Kaulien to his bones.

The *Othenor* was still at the dock. During their stay at the Broken Castle, they had taken care to inspect it regularly and ensure that it was stocked with freshwater and supplies. The sloop was ready to leave at any moment.

The fishy smell reminded Léti of how hopeful they were when they arrived in Junine—too hopeful, it now appeared. Though their group had added a new member, their enemy had once again killed another heir.

He would pay for it this time.

Léti swore, by Eurydis, by all the gods who would hear her words, that she would find a way to punish the man who had sent the Züu after them. The man who had taken Séhane from them.

Suddenly she remembered the canvas the queen had given her. She had left it at the castle. *It didn’t matter now*, she thought. She would retrieve it once she had fulfilled her vow, after Séhane had been avenged.

Rey detached the mooring lines and jumped onto the deck, and the sloop slowly drifted away from the dock. Yan had already hoisted the sails and maneuvered the boat to leave the harbor as quickly as possible. *The relative comfort and security of the Broken Castle was over*, he thought. Once again they were on the run.

Darkness closed in around the *Othenor* as they sailed farther out into Lake Junine. Bowbaq wanted to light some lanterns, but Grigán wouldn’t allow it so long as they could be spotted from Junine. The giant paled in anguish.

Rey said to him, a bit harshly, “You are already scared of water and crowds. You’re not also scared of the dark, are you?”

“You would be, too, if you had seen it,” the giant responded flatly.

“Bowbaq was very courageous,” Grigán confirmed. “If he hadn’t showed up to help me...”

“But what actually happened?”

Grigán stared out into the shadows for a long time before responding.

“I prefer that we wait until dawn to talk about it. I would appreciate it if everyone stayed awake tonight. I doubt any of us will find sleep tonight anyhow. Stay in groups too. In fact, it’s best if we all just stay on the deck.”

They kept their questions to themselves and tried to get comfortable. The night was painted in stars, and the river murmured gently. The air was mild and the wind light. Nature completely ignored their tragedy.

The warrior approached Lana, self-conscious about what he was going to ask. “Uh, Lana... you are a Maz, right? If you could say a prayer for us all, something to protect us from demons, or I don’t know what... now’s the time.”

She slowly nodded her head, frightened by Grigán’s worried tone. Then she fervently prayed to Eurydis.

She also asked the Goddess to lead Séhane’s spirit to her, to a magnificent valley, full of laughing children.



“It was a *Mog’lur*,” Bowbaq said for the second time. “A demon warrior. I saw a *Mog’lur*!” he repeated, incredulous.

“Not only that, but you attacked it,” Grigán reminded him, amused. “Haphazardly, without thinking, but you attacked.”

“All right already,” Léti interrupted. “Are you finally going to tell us what it looked like?”

The warrior and the giant looked at one another, questioningly. It was light out now, but the memory was still just as frightening in the day as it was the night before. The *Othenor* had been sailing downriver all night and into the second deciday. It left Galen in its wake and was now pointed toward the northwest heading toward the Manive Strait, where it would then sail for the Land of Beauty. Any danger seemed far away. The heirs were now asking for answers, more detailed than the ones they had been imagining all night, but which Bowbaq and Grigán couldn’t provide.

“It was big, very big. And strong too.”

“Completely black. Not just dark-colored. Totally *black*.”

“It was naked too. But it was sexless. Its skin... wasn’t really skin. It didn’t have any hair, or feathers. It was... something else.”

“Fish scales?” Rey laughed, before Lana’s shocked expression silenced him.

“But what was it?” Léti insisted. “A man or a beast?”

“I don’t know. Both at once. Depending when you looked.”

“It was always changing form. It grew eyes and arms like mushrooms. It stood like a man, but moved like a wild animal.”

“A Mog’lur,” Bowbaq confidently concluded.

Classifying the strange apparition within Ark mythology helped the giant to better accept it. It was just as dreadful, but less distressing.

Corenn asked, “Have you ever heard of a Mog’lur, Lana?”

“No,” the Maz admitted. “But *The Book of the Wise One* doesn’t mention many demons. I don’t mean to offend you, Bowbaq, but I think Mog’lurs are unique to legends from Arkary.”

“And the Broken Castle,” Rey added, cynically.

“Bowbaq, I’m happy that you could help Grigán,” Léti congratulated him, disappointed that she wasn’t able to do the same.

“I was so scared,” the giant said, his tone barely above a whisper. “I saw the demon knock him over. I ran and struck it as hard as I could. Séhane’s guards came to help, but the monster’s wounds healed up after every blow. It didn’t bleed. Then it grew another eye. I thought we were doomed. Then suddenly, it was simply gone.”

“Maybe you killed it?”

“No,” the giant and the warrior answered in unison.

“In my opinion, we couldn’t kill it,” Grigán added.

Bowbaq moved in close to examine the warrior’s arm, hanging in a sling. It wasn’t broken, but it was terribly bruised. It was the first time the giant had seen Grigán injured. It was hardly a reassuring sight.

“The Züu could never cross the glacier that stands between them and my family,” he announced. “But the Mog’lur... it... it can go anywhere. We must find our enemy *very soon*.” It was a plea. Everyone hoped it wasn’t already too late for Bowbaq’s wife and children.

Corenn stood and paced about, thinking.

“It’s possible that Séhane’s death is in no way related to Ji,” Yan pointed out. Despite the possibility, even Yan didn’t believe this idea.



“After the warning at the assembly of barons, I’d be surprised if it were a coincidence. And it fits with our theories about the portals and the other world.”

The heirs looked at each other, wide-eyed. Corenn had just spoken, out loud, about Ji’s mysteries in front of Lana, and without any ambiguity. She had betrayed her promise.

“Our ancestors abandoned this orphan promise long ago,” the Mother reminded them, as if reading their minds. “And I think the circumstances are grave enough to allow an exception. Lana is just as mixed up in all this as we are now. It’s best that she knows why we’re in peril.”

They all agreed, and with her heart racing, the Maz prepared herself to hear their secrets. She imagined they would be interesting, though they were more troubling than she had hoped.

“I would have liked to have seen that,” she murmured, when Corenn had finished the story.

“It was magnificent,” Rey admitted. “Truly breathtaking. But somehow we all walked away... saddened.”

“Why?”

“It’s a mystery. The feeling of a lost paradise, something like that. Frustration at not being able to go inside.”

“What do you think is behind the portal?” Grigán asked the Maz.

“I don’t know. *The Book of the Wise One* mentions lots of marvelous places that fit the description. There are a few more legends found in the appendices, but I’ve hardly studied them. They don’t have much to do with the Moral.”

“A shame. Do you recall a few of the legends?”

“They won’t help us much, I’m afraid. I think one of them was about cursed children, imprisoned in a marvelous country... another confirmed the existence of an ancient people, hidden away in the mountains and protected by gods... yet another was about spirits that were reincarnated as children. But please, don’t trust my memory.”

“You don’t know any legends about a land of demons?” asked Bowbaq.

The Maz’s eyes widened in fear. The question made her realize the true danger they might be in. How had she not thought of it sooner?

“The *Jal’karu*,” she stated, pointedly. “The land from where the black gods are born and nurtured. It’s in *The Book*.”

It was one of the heirs' worst fears. But it would remain only a theory so long as they hadn't read Maz Achem's journal.

"Jal'karu, that's not an Ithare name," Yan commented. "It sounds kind of like Bowbaq's Mog'lur."

"True. Do you know where the name comes from?" Corenn asked.

"Ethèque," Lana answered with certainty. "It's in the first texts of *The Book*. Those that were transcribed from oral tradition."

"The drawings of Ji's portal were of that same origin. The same goes for Arkary's great arch. Perhaps the Ethèques built them. We'll have to look into them."

The others wondered how Corenn planned on looking into the oldest people of the known world, who had disappeared several dozen eons before. But the Mother had an idea. It involved a special detour that, like everything else that was likely to be of any help to them, also involved a certain danger.



Two eventless days passed by. Grigán's arm was still injured, but he managed to devise a few more exercises to satisfy Léti's hunger for improvement. The young woman, now equipped with her rapier and armor, was becoming quite the fighter. The warrior knew she was skilled enough to become a truly formidable one.

Again, Corenn and Yan separated from the group to discuss magic. The Mother promised him they would move on to more technical lessons soon, perhaps after they met with Usul. For the young man, his theoretical training was almost done, and he could barely wait to put it into practice.

Meanwhile, Rey discovered a new passion for the Eurydian cult, scrambling for any excuse to get closer to Lana. Even though she knew his true motives, the Maz played along and discussed the universal Moral with him for decadays on end. No one felt like betraying the actor as the one who, historically, had followed these virtuous principles with the least fervor.

Bowbaq had fallen more quiet than usual. His battle with the Mog'lur had shaken him even more deeply than the events on Ji. This time, his family was in danger, and the giant began to doubt himself again.

Unbeknownst to him, the third day of their voyage would see a major change in his character.

The *Othenor* left the Median Sea for the Rominian Sea, and the heirs gathered on deck to talk about their nearing destination. Corenn and Grigán knew enough about it to satisfy their curiosity, and they listened to the leaders of their group as they shared their knowledge, Bowbaq included.

The Land of Beauty was an archipelago of more than thirty islands ranging widely in size. They all belonged to the Guoris, a somewhat primitive people, but the lands still held inexhaustible riches.

The Guoris had endured several Rominian assaults from the north, during the time of Two Empires. The Land of Beauty maintained its freedom in large part due to its geography. Each island had to be conquered and held individually, which cost the invaders too much time and resources. The stakes weren't worth it, and Romine gave up. After these failed conquests, the Guoris learned to prevent future attacks.

By and large they weren't a warring people. Their only excursions consisted of the occasional trade with the Baronies and the sultans of Jezeba. But they used their occasional earnings to build up a war fleet strong enough to make any would-be invader think twice.

The money was quickly exhausted to meet the high cost of their growing fleet and army of mercenaries. To maintain their defenses, the Guoris had the idea to rent a few of their coveted islands. The tenants would have complete sovereignty on their island, and be protected by a fleet, an amenity included in the rent they paid.

It was a surpassing success: A third of the Land of Beauty's islands were now occupied by Loreliens, Goranese, Rominians, Jez, and Junians who were wealthy enough to pay the extravagant rent. The fleet was manned entirely by mercenaries. The Guoris returned to their tribal life, unconcerned with the rest of the world, and stockpiled a fortune that they hardly touched.

"My friend has lived there for more than thirty years," Grigán shared. "He might be able to arrange a visit to the Sacred Island for us."

"How do you know someone so rich?" Rey asked in surprise.

"I got him out of some trouble in Manive, dozens of years ago. Some pickpockets had caught up with him, and I helped him out. Over the years he has amply repaid the favor. His name is Zarbone."

"*Zarbone?*" the actor repeated, suspiciously.

“He’s no Zü. He’s Goranese.”

“Where did he make his fortune?”

“Frankly, I don’t know. I think he owns a lot of land in the Grand Empire. He also deals in antiques. He’s obsessed with collecting—so much so that he renamed his island *Collection*.”

“I would really like to have my own island,” Léti said, dreamily.

“You wouldn’t like your neighbors,” Grigán warned. “The Züu have an island in the Land of Beauty. The Valipondes too. Zarbone suspects that the island closest to his hides a sacrificial temple for K’lur.”

“He’s not sure?”

“Of course not! The tenants are masters of their island, but they are forbidden to set foot elsewhere. For us, too, to meet Zarbone, we will have to get through the Guoris’ mercenaries. The Land of Beauty is one of the most heavily defended places in the world!”

“Let’s hope the islands are better defended than Séhane’s castle anyway,” Rey remarked.

It was then that Bowbaq jumped up, a surprised expression on his face. His companions could see that it had nothing to do with their conversation. The giant was listening to something, but the others couldn’t hear a thing.

“Someone is talking to me!” he whispered seriously. “In my mind. An erjak!” He rushed to the edge of the sloop to look out over the horizon. Sure enough, there was another boat in view, but it was several leagues away.

“They can reach your mind from that far?”

“No, Léti,” Bowbaq responded with an absentminded air. He was troubled by the interior voice. “Not human. It’s an animal erjak. It’s the first time that an animal has ever started the conversation!” he joyously announced to the group.

Hoping to see the animal, the giant peered down into the water, trying to penetrate past the fading light. With the connection to the animal, the giant feared the immense expanse of water less. Besides, after confronting a Mog’lur, the fear of drowning seemed absurd.

“What are they saying?” Yan asked, as everyone else tried to see something under the water’s surface.

“He says: play,” Bowbaq said in an emotional voice. “It’s a message of friendship. I need to see him. I need to respond!”

“There!” Grigán said, pointing off the bow. His eyes were more discerning than anyone else’s. “Gyole dolphins.”

A group of four dolphins were racing fifty yards in front of the sloop. Bowbaq rushed to the bow and admired the merry animals, who seemed to be able to reciprocate Bowbaq’s same level of intelligent thought.

He concentrated and reached the closest one’s mind and entered it with ease. The animal didn’t have the typical reaction of rejecting him right away.

“He understands!” the giant exclaimed, tears in his eyes. “He asked me why humans never respond!”

The heirs enviously watched joy overtake the northerner, knowing well that they would never experience anything like it.

Bowbaq thought he could easily reach the *deep mind* of his new friend, but he resisted the temptation, fearing the avalanche of marine sensations that could overwhelm him.

The dolphins escorted the sloop for a while, until the *Othenor* met the other boat. It was then that everything went wrong.

Bowbaq felt the shock of a harpoon in his skin as if he himself had been the impaled dolphin, as if he really had shared its *deep mind*. He felt the animal’s agonized suffering as the whaler’s crew pulled their prey to the ship. He heard the desperate, incomprehensible cries of the other dolphins in his mind as if they were screaming in his own ears.

“Yan, could you bring us closer to that boat?” he asked, brow furrowed.

The young man obeyed. He did not know what the giant had in mind, but agreed without a second thought.

“Bowbaq, it won’t do any good.” Grigán tried to dissuade his friend, feeling the approaching conflict. “They’re only doing their jobs.”

“It’s not even for food,” the giant grumbled, growing even more furious. “It’s just for money!”

As the *Othenor* got closer to the whaling ship, its crew began bustling about the deck. A dozen or so bronzed men stood at the ready, weapons in hand, and the whaler captain changed course to bear down on the heirs.

“By all the gods and their whores!” Rey shouted, momentarily forgetting Lana’s presence. “They’re going to board our ship too! They’re pirates!”

“If we hadn’t changed course, they would have left us alone!” Grigán complained as he went searching for his curved blade.

He came back with his bow and Bowbaq’s mace, but the giant refused, looking nauseated and weak.

“Thank you, my friend. You were right to tell me... that I needed to defend myself. But with a weapon... no. It’s unfair. Animals don’t have any. I want to fight, but without a weapon.”

“If you are barehanded and your enemy has a sword, that’s not exactly a fair fight either!”

“Grigán, have you seen the size of his fists? Is it really that unfair?” Rey hollered.

Corenn and Lana went down below deck, following Grigán’s orders. Léti stood firm, despite her aunt’s pleas for her to follow. Yan armed himself with the broadsword Léti was no longer using. His heart hammered in his chest, like everyone else’s. He thought for a moment that it would all be okay. It’s not like they would just ram right into each other.

Much to Yan’s surprise, the two boats did just that, and after the boats collided, three pirates jumped aboard the *Othenor*. Grigán put an arrow in the first one’s throat, and Rey put a crossbow bolt into the second one’s stomach. He then stumbled and fell overboard.

Bowbaq grabbed the third by his ankle and lifted him up, flipping him upside down. He could still hear the dolphin’s pain and confusion ringing in his ears. He swung the man around his head twice and flung him overboard, before jumping on board the enemy ship.

The heirs looked at each other, surprised. Bowbaq had never shown such aggression. He had already lugged three men overboard before Rey and Léti could jump aboard the whaling ship and join the fight. Arrow after arrow, Grigán took care of the most dangerously armed pirates, shooting them down before they came near the unprotected giant. With an ease that filled her with a wild joy, Léti injured the first two who came at her. But she quickly regained focus and tried to stay calm. *Sharp mind.*

The fight had only just begun, but already only five able pirates remained, and they were cowering away from their enemies on the opposite end of the ship. Léti and Rey came back aboard the sloop, but Bowbaq wasn’t finished. He first freed the injured dolphin, who fled with what remaining strength it had. Then, to Grigán’s dismay, Bowbaq disappeared below deck and out of sight. The warrior could no longer cover him. The

giant quickly reemerged, though, and he joined his friends shortly after, wearing a satisfied expression on his face.

The whaling ship sunk below the waves before the *Othenor* had even sailed a half league.

“How big was the hole you made?” Yan asked, amused and happy that they had escaped so easily.

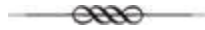
“Just big enough so they couldn’t plug it up,” the giant answered with a wink.

“Don’t you think that was a bit cruel?” Lana said timidly. “Those men will struggle to reach the coast.”

“They only have to ask the dolphins for help.” But Bowbaq wasn’t so cynical and added, “They have a small lifeboat. I detached it before leaving the ship. It will teach them a lesson.”

Corenn commented, “Still, we didn’t need to add this extra risk.”

“But yes! The heroes *always* sink the pirate ship,” Rey concluded, with a sense of humor that only he understood.



The first islands of the Land of Beauty appeared on the horizon at the apogee of the fourth day. If the western islands had been their destination, it would have taken them another two days to get there. Fortunately, according to Grigán’s memory, the island of Collection was located at the southern end of Great Island, the capital and largest island of the archipelago.

The *Othenor* hadn’t quite sailed past the first sandbar when a huge warship, which must have been a carrack, intersected their path and blocked the way. The heirs waited calmly for it to drift in closer.

“What do you think, Bowbaq, how big of a hole would you need to sink a boat that size?”

The giant shrugged his shoulders, choosing to ignore Rey’s joke. After the fact, Bowbaq was ashamed of his violent outburst, but the actor wouldn’t let any opportunity to tease him slip by.

The carrack and its crew were from Jez, but they had been hired by the king to serve the Land of Beauty. When the captain spoke, it was in the Guori tongue. None of the heirs spoke Guori. Grigán chose to answer in Jezac, yet another language he alone knew.

“We wish to go to Collection. The governor is our friend. It’s just a cordial visit.”

Each island’s tenant took the title of governor, which wasn’t far from reality, since each governor genuinely ruled their strip of land and held all the same powers as the Guori king, at least on their own land.

Grigán’s indifference relaxed the mercenaries. “Is he expecting you?” the Jez captain inquired.

“Unfortunately not. But he’ll be delighted to host us; I’m sure.”

Grigán hoped he wasn’t mistaken. It had been two years since he last saw Zarbone. It was possible he was no longer alive.

The mercenary captain volunteered to be their escort, an offer that was more order than courtesy. Yan steered the *Othenor*, trailing closely behind the carrack.

It occurred to Corenn that their small group of heirs didn’t include anyone from Jez. No descendant of Chief Ssa-Vez. Similarly, there was no descendant of Prince Vanamel, nor his counselor, Saat the Treasurer; the three emissaries who had perished during the expedition to Ji. Coincidence? Or was there an explanation, however complex it might be?

Her mind raced, making connections between other pieces of information, combining them to quickly form a new theory. The sudden clarity of it froze her with fear.

The queen had been spared from the Züu’s attacks for a long time. Their enemy might have kept her alive for a few extra dékades with the sole aim of setting a trap for the survivors, who would no doubt gather in Junine. Or then again... perhaps Séhane wasn’t on the blacklist?

The Mother quickly gathered her friends to debate the idea. From the very beginning of their journey, the heirs had learned to respect Corenn’s intelligence, and they listened to her attentively.

“Only children conceived after the wise ones’ return were invited to the reunions on the Day of the Owl,” she announced, excited. “Were there heirs who were never invited? Let’s proceed by a process of elimination. The wise from Goran, Vanamel, and Saat never survived the expedition, and neither of them had children. Their case is easiest. But the others?”

“Arkane of Junine and Chief Ssa-Vez of Jezeba were the only ones who were fathers before they set sail for Ji. Vez never came back. His descendants always avoided the reunions, and the current generation of his descendants surely knows nothing about the whole story.



“Which leaves Arkane. He had a son, Thomé, Séhane’s father, and no other children. Thomé participated in a few reunions, but he kept his children from them. Séhane wouldn’t have known anything about us if it weren’t for her grandfather’s legacy.

“She wasn’t a target for the Züu. She was in danger only after meeting us! She might even still be alive if we had avoided Junine... no amount of tears and regrets will change the past.

“The rest of us here, apart from Yan, are descendants of children who were conceived after the emissaries returned. Our enemy is trying to kill off only heirs like us. I think that Séhane was killed only as a preventative measure, to keep her from helping us.”

“What does it mean?” asked Lana.

“I don’t know. When we figure it out, we’ll know how to fight back. Still, it’s just an idea. If Vez’s offspring were attacked, the whole theory falls apart.”

“Unless our enemy wants to cover his tracks. Or maybe he has incomplete information. Perhaps he doesn’t want to take any risks,” Rey remarked. “In fact, we don’t know any more than we did before, no offense, Corenn.”

“There are so many things we don’t know,” the Mother said with a sigh. “Who is the Accuser? And why? Where do the portals lead? How do they work?”

“What did our ancestors live through?” Lana added.

“And who was Nol?” Léti continued. “And the Mog’lur?”

“And why is Bowbaq so huge?” Rey joked.

His interjection relaxed them all a little, and it was rewarded with a few smiles. Still, it was as if their minds were being swallowed up in a heavy, harrowing fog. If they didn’t find a few answers quickly, they might disappear into the fog forever.



The carrack, with its enormous sails, led the *Othenor* at a brisk pace. The Jez crew knew the archipelago’s waters well, its currents, reefs, and sandbars, so they could navigate easily through the maze that was presented by the Land of Beauty. They passed through stretches of water that the heirs would have hesitated to sail into alone.

The whole time, the mercenary captain didn't speak a word to them, except once. Lana shuddered when Grigán translated. Had the Jez read their minds?

"They forbid us from going to that island over there," the warrior repeated for his companions. "It is, of course, the Sacred Island of the Guoris."

"I thought it was forbidden to step foot on any of the islands, anyhow?" Rey said.

"It is. They warned us to not even get close. It's an extremely dangerous place. Not like that's a surprise or anything," he replied.

They all stared at the solitary island. It was covered in thick vegetation, and the only point of elevation was a bare hill that rose a few hundred yards above the greenery.

Yan added, "It's becoming a habit of ours, visiting forbidden islands."

"A specialty, even," Rey clarified with a stilted air. "At least there won't be any Züu on this one."

They tried to not think about what they might find instead. Not all of the popular legends about Usul ended dramatically, but there was still a common theme of death and madness.

Lana had read somewhere that mortals would sometimes fall victim to the god's vast knowledge, to his divine knowledge. Usul was He Who Knows. Eurydis was She Who Guides. The Maz couldn't understand how Knowledge, one of the Eurydis cult's three virtues, could be a source of torment.

Surprised, Corenn said, "The island isn't guarded? I don't see any ships, and there's no sign of any structures on the island."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Grigán remarked. "The last time I came through, the place was teeming with ships. I wonder what this could mean?"

Bowbaq said with conviction, "It's better this way. It will be easier."

"Don't be so sure..." the warrior said, scrutinizing the island with his eagle-eye vision, hoping to see some movement. But it was in vain. Soon the island disappeared behind another, and the mysterious place fell out of view.

Near the end of the day, they arrived at Collection. A Jez sounded a horn announcing their arrival, and an old man with a white beard wearing nothing but a loincloth appeared shortly thereafter. He walked along the

beach to the little dock. Two Jez in a dinghy pulled in and announced the visit of a certain Ramgrith. The man waved excitedly to the *Othenor*. Their duty fulfilled, the two Jez men left shortly after. If Zarbone had denied knowing Grigán, or refused to host them, the Jez would have chased the heirs from the Land of Beauty.

“His island is enormous,” Léti exclaimed as Yan maneuvered the boat toward the dock. “It’s one of the biggest we’ve seen so far.”

Grigán confirmed, “He is very, very wealthy. Oddly, apart from pursuing his passion for collecting, he lives here like a Guori. He’s the strangest man I’ve ever met. Of course, that was before meeting you, Reyan.”

“I must return the compliment,” the actor responded, taken by surprise.

The *Othenor* slowly drew alongside the dock, and Grigán jumped out to tie up the boat. With the knots in place, he turned toward the skinny man, his skin bronzed by years of sun. Zarbone hugged him enthusiastically.

“It’s been a long time, you foul-mouthed Ramgrith, sword dragger, old pirate, you! I thought Aleb had finally caught up to you! You could have come to visit sooner!”

The man threw out all these insults with a smile on his face and without hesitation, but the heirs couldn’t imagine that Grigán would forgive such a flagrant lack of respect. To their great surprise, Grigán returned his friend’s greeting, “Old pirate, yourself! You smell so strongly of liquor, we just followed our noses!”

Zarbone laughed at his friend’s wit, and composed himself as Grigán’s companions stepped onto the dock. The old man appeared to blush under his white beard as the warrior introduced in succession Léti, Maz Lana, and Corenn.

“Ladies, please pardon my outfit,” he excused himself awkwardly. “You’re the first women to visit Collection.”

“Thank you for letting us invade, master Zarbone,” Corenn responded. “We are flattered by the honor, and hope we won’t be too much of a bother to you.”

“Oh please, you are welcome here! I have plenty of space!” he exclaimed, gesturing to his property. “The bad part about having an island as a home, you see, is that it is surrounded by water. You don’t get many visitors!”

Zarbone led them to the beach, and then along a trail that snaked through thick vegetation. He and Grigán reminisced over old times, jostling and teasing each other. Rey, who was an expert in this sort of banter, soon joined their conversation.

Yan interrupted them, “I can hear lots of animals.”

“Even some large beasts,” added Bowbaq, who had also noticed the unusual concert of growls and chirps.

“It’s my animal collection,” Zarbone responded casually. “Concerning which, if you see a large white lizard, about three feet long, try to catch him without hurting him. It’s my alabaster monitor. He keeps getting out. On an island, he can’t get very far, but I worry that he will fall into a snake pit or run across a sand eel laying her eggs.”

He turned back around and continued on as if it were nothing. The heirs watched him wide-eyed. Every step of their journey was an adventure in itself.



Even though he lived on an isolated island, Zarbone’s house would have made most Lorelien merchants jealous. He gave the previous governor credit for its construction; he just added some personal touches to the original. He paid the Guoris king a hefty sum for the added value of the home.

His house was two floors, the lower one used only to support the main rooms on the upper floors. It wasn’t made of bamboo and woven reeds, as the heirs had expected. To their surprise, it was built entirely of fine stone and marble, which could only have come from the continent. It must have taken several years for the whole operation, costing more gold than they would ever see. The end result was well worth it.

“Tiny cats!” Léti yelled, as they walked up to the front door.

“*Dwarf cats*,” Zarbone corrected her, moving aside to let them by. “They’re supposed to be more playful, but all they do is sleep and sleep. At least they don’t have to worry about the meaning of life. Just sleep.”

Léti petted one of the kitties that was lazily stretching out on its back. Up close, it looked very different from a normal cat, resembling a miniature tiger more than an ordinary house cat. Starved for attention, the little animal followed Léti inside.

“If you like him, I’ll give him to you,” the governor said. “There are so many of them on the island. Now that they’re starting to fight among themselves, you would make that little one happy.”

The young woman thanked Zarbone, but decided to wait on giving him an answer. How could she possibly look after an animal, even one so small?

Their host led them to the second-floor terrace and offered them a drink. Once they were through with the usual polite small talk, Grigán got right to business and gave a detailed narrative of their run-ins with the Züu. Zarbone listened to Grigán’s story actively, asking important questions and raising his eyebrows in surprise at the Züu’s determination.

“He’s a magician,” Corenn whispered to Yan. “He has the tic.”

“The tic?”

“Watch the way he points to objects as he talks, or stares at them. You’ll understand soon enough.”

After studying him closely, Yan admitted Zarbone might be a magician. Now that this had been brought to his attention, he noticed Corenn had similar mannerisms as well. He wondered if one day he would inadvertently show the same proof of his power.

It didn’t take the old man long to realize that Grigán was leaving out important details of his story. The warrior had omitted everything that was supernatural. He took no offense. *A hidden truth is a white lie*, says the proverb.

“You’re really in a lot of trouble,” he said, digesting the evidence.

*What would he think if he knew about the Mog’lur?* Rey thought to himself.

“So you’re being hunted by the Züu from the Upper Kingdoms. The killers have been sent by an unknown enemy, one whose motivations are no less mysterious than his identity... yes, you’re in a lot of trouble.”

“Oh, you forgot to mention Grigán’s short temper,” Rey added.

“Can’t you stop acting like a fool for just one deciday?” the warrior grumbled.

“Ha, you see! Proof right there,” the actor shot back, proud of himself.

Zarbone didn’t laugh at the joke. He had been in a good mood when the heirs arrived, but now he had a serious, pensive expression on his face.

“Of course you’re welcome to hide out here, but the Züu have an island less than a dozen miles away. They’ll end up finding out you’re here

through the Guoris or the mercenaries.”

“We can’t stay here anyhow,” Corenn assured him.

She was thinking about how the demon had found them in the Broken Castle. There was no hope of hiding anywhere. They were not going to put Zarbone in danger, not like they had Séhane.

“What can I do to help you, then? Do you need money, Grigán?” he suggested with sudden inspiration.

“You’ve already given me far too much over the years. Don’t worry; we have what we need.”

“We want to see Usul,” Lana announced coldly.

Zarbone, speechless, waited for someone from the group to object. They couldn’t really be planning such a thing.

“I recommend you reconsider,” he stated, flatly. “It would be better to take on the Züu.”

“It’s our only chance,” Lana reasoned. “We need answers, and surely the Guoris don’t guard their island as well as the Züu do their secrets.”

“You don’t get it,” he explained. “The Guoris don’t guard the island for their own personal pleasure. Even they avoid setting foot there. The only reason their vessels patrol the island is to keep people from bringing a curse upon themselves.”

“How can you say Knowledge is a curse?”

“I’ve heard stories of men completely consumed by curiosity who sailed for the Sacred Island. I’ve met a few of those who were lucky enough to return. Those people come back completely mad; that’s all there is to it. They go prostrate for days, moons, even years sometimes. All of them, every single one, end up killing themselves.”

“Eurydis will help us,” Lana affirmed, her voice lacking the confidence she wanted. “She will give me strength.”

“I regret to hear that you’re making this decision,” he concluded, sadly.

The old man was sure of himself. Bowbaq felt his conviction faltering. Then he remembered the Mog’lur, which gave him newfound determination.

“Ships are no longer patrolling the island,” Grigán said. “Why is that?”

“I wasn’t aware. They were still there not too long ago. That’s bad news for you. It means the Guoris have found a better way to guard the

place. As for knowing what that might be...”

Grigán agreed with a sigh. He had already come to the same conclusion.



In the end, Léti decided to keep the cat. The tiny animal had faithfully followed her all night, and stayed especially close when they ate grilled fish with Zarbone.

Yan jokingly suggested that she name it Frog, because it jumped around more than it walked. The young woman found the idea charming and adopted it without giving it a second thought. The heirs welcomed a new member to their group: a dwarf cat that made Yan jealous every time it jumped into Léti’s lap.

She reminded Bowbaq of his promise to use his erjak powers on the animal of her choice, and the giant happily agreed to fulfill his promise.

But Léti’s choice shocked Rey. “Why waste Bowbaq’s gift on a *cat*? You could have asked him to train a dog, a wolf, a bear; I don’t know, something useful?”

“It would be hard to hold a bear in my lap,” *Léti retorted.*

With her response the actor gave up trying to reason with her. If he knew how to use Bowbaq or Corenn’s powers, he would make gold. His friends were just country folk, though, unable to appreciate civilized society and the pursuit of wealth.

Zarbone granted his guests the privilege of visiting his various collections. They looked over several of them. One was just sundials with mesmerizing patterns, another a display of daggers, and another rare manuscripts. Zarbone saved the tour of his animal reserve for the next day.

Rey gave him the *hati* that he had kept since the beginning of his journey. He found the object revolting and was happy to finally find an opportunity to get rid of it. Zarbone accepted the gift with genuine appreciation. He already had a similar item, but it lacked the poison tip. He thanked him so profusely that even Rey was embarrassed.

Corenn dove into the manuscripts as soon as courtesy would allow, while Léti could do no more than stare at the lines of shelves that held hundreds of volumes, most of which were in good condition. Seeing so much writing overwhelmed her.

“Wouldn’t that be funny if we found something about our ancestors in here?” she suggested, sliding her fingers along a row of perfectly aligned book spines.

A flash of memory struck Grigán just then. “There is something. Zarbone showed me a few years ago. Do you remember...”

“Of course,” the old man confirmed, pulling out a thick volume.

The page was marked, and he found the passage right away. They all waited impatiently for him to read it aloud.

“It’s in *The Five Dynasties of the Sultanate*. I stumbled across it randomly, when I was rebinding it. It says, *And so, Sultan Absoura no longer had a war chief, since he had sent his to the Island of Ji in Lorelia, following the request of a foreigner, named Nol. The emissary never returned, and Absoura was confronted with the problem of choosing a new war chief among...* the rest isn’t of much interest to you. I scanned the whole chapter. There’s not much, you see?”

“Do you mind?” Corenn said, reaching out her hand.

“Of course not.”

The Mother scanned the few lines of text avidly. The cited emissary could only be Ssa-Vez. However, something wasn’t right. Lana was the first to figure it out.

“I don’t remember a sultan named Absoura. My history lessons were a long time ago, but the name should still ring a bell...”

Her remark was the spark that set off a fire in Corenn’s mind. The Mother opened the book to its first few pages and found what she was looking for. It was more surprising and more important than anything they had found so far.

“This book is more than three hundred years old!” she announced to the group, solemnly. “These men followed a certain Nol to the Island of Ji two centuries before our ancestors!”

The heirs stared at each other, baffled. Their research kept leading to new questions, new mysteries, which invariably ensured more danger.

Zarbone asked for the book to confirm the date. Corenn was right, of course. He scanned the last pages to make sure the text didn’t mention any of the more recent sultans. It couldn’t be an error; the book truly was three centuries old.

“It can’t be the same Nol,” Rey commented, uncertainly.



Unperturbed, Grigán reminded him, “Impossible doesn’t mean much for us anymore.”

They couldn’t mention the portal in front of Zarbone, or the other world, or the Mog’lur, but none of it was far from their minds. Grigán was right: They had long ago surpassed the limits of reality.

“What could it mean?” Léti asked. “That the wise have been meeting on Ji for millennia? But why?”

“To make Nol’s *important decision*,” the Mother reminded them. “But we have no idea what that could be.”

The room grew quiet, everyone feeling uncomfortable about Zarbone’s presence. It was out of the question to involve him any further and put his life in danger. They would have to postpone their discussion until later.

Corenn felt it was the right time to fill them in on her plan. “More than ever, we need information. I think it’s safe to say that everyone now agrees we must go meet with Usul, like Lana suggested?”

They all nodded in agreement, while Zarbone shook his head disapprovingly.

“If we don’t find out anything from our visit with Usul, I propose we resort to another source of knowledge. A lot less mysterious, and probably just as reliable.”

Rey jested, “What? Some other god?”

“No. Something entirely human. The Imperial Eclectic Library in Romine. Perhaps better known as the *Deep Tower Library*.”

“No one can get in there,” Grigán objected, sticking to his role as the voice of reason.

Lana added in a trembling voice, “It’s haunted. They say that ghosts have been watching over it for centuries. I am more willing to go see Usul than enter that dark place.”

Yan, Léti, Rey, and Bowbaq had divided opinions. If Corenn thought it would help them, then they should do it. After all, they had survived so many attacks in the past that a library, even a haunted one, seemed like a fairly safe place. In fact, as soon as the Mother had mentioned it, they were convinced that they would one day go there, no matter what happened...

“I can get you in,” Zarbone announced proudly. “If you really want to, I can help you.”

“How?”

“I have a friend, in Romine, who promised me he knows where to find a few rare items for my own library. I am sure he means the Deep Tower. He never said as much, but the way he eludes my questions is a strong-enough confession.”

“Even if it’s true, why would he help us?”

“I will write you a letter of recommendation. That might convince him. If not, offer him money. Sad to say, but he is always looking to get his hands on more golden monarchs, even though he has as many as I do.”

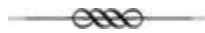
Corenn and Grigán thanked Zarbone for his help. If someone could get them into the Deep Tower, then their plan could actually work. Lana had already been paralyzed with fear at the idea of meeting Usul, and now she would soon be meeting ghosts too!

“You don’t find this all to be too easy?” Rey asked, serious for once. “Our ancestors tried in vain to unveil the mystery for more than a century. We’ve already learned more than them in only a few dékades.”

“You think this was easy?” Grigán shouted in disbelief.

“None of them were as motivated as we have been. We don’t have any choice *but* to find out,” Corenn explained.

The warrior couldn’t help but add, “By the way, if you thought this was easy, then good for you; though I fear, Reyan, that the worst is yet to come.”



The next day, all of the heirs but two visited Zarbone’s animal collection. Yan quickly abandoned the others when Corenn offered to teach him more magic. He knew he was nearly finished with the lessons on theory and was anxious to move on to actual practice, mindful that Léti was already a warrior, while he was still just an apprentice sorcerer.

They walked along the sun-drenched beach for the lesson. Corenn passed on her knowledge solely through words, which allowed them to go anywhere for lessons, or even discuss while taking a stroll, which is what they were doing today.

“Did you ever wonder why you passed the test with your shell and not the coin?”

“Yes, of course. At first I thought it was because that coin was ruining my concentration, but I’m guessing it’s more complicated than that. Maybe

the earth component was stronger in the shell than in the coin, and therefore easier to manipulate?”

“That could be it,” Corenn admitted. “But for such small objects, the differences aren’t tangible enough for them to have any effect on a spell’s success. It has to do with something else. The *receptiveness* of objects.”

Yan listened closely to the Mother’s explanations. At the end of every lesson, he thought he knew everything there was to know about magic, or close to it. However, Corenn always presented him with new concepts, which he did his best to absorb. He had realized the benefit of these lectures long ago. If he had started using magic haphazardly from the start, he would be like a man who ate unknown mushrooms: dead.

“In theory, all things can be altered, since they contain the four elements. But in practice, magicians have noticed differences in receptiveness, even between similar objects, like two staffs made from the same tree, for example. It remains unexplained. It’s magic’s biggest mystery.”

Yan’s eyes widened. It was the first time the Mother didn’t offer him some interpretation, not even a personal theory, on an aspect of their power.

“Some speak of a fifth element,” she continued. “Something we would call *recept*. But no one has managed to really define it, nor explain how it works. What seems to be true is that the recept is more present in things that have been the object of human attention. The stronger the recept in the object, the easier it is to apply your Will to it. But even this general rule suffers from exceptions and doesn’t always hold.”

“Can an object’s recept vary from one day to the next?”

Corenn praised him, “Good question. No, if it’s strong one day, it’s just as strong the next, and even the year after. Perhaps it could change over a few centuries, but no one could possibly live long enough to know that for certain.”

The two were reminded of the strange discovery from the evening before. Nol. He might have lived long enough. The idea had crossed their minds that Nol may be their enemy, but the implications were so dark that they avoided talking about it.

“I have heard stories, however, though they’re rare, about objects with an exceptional recept that was completely lost after being manipulated by an excessive application of Will. Magicians call these objects *exhausted*.

From then on, they will always be immune to power. I've never witnessed it myself."

"It's a shame," Yan commented, studying his medallion.

He thought about the one he had given Léti. It had been easy to force the scroll to penetrate the opal. The gem's recept must have been quite strong. Was the opal *exhausted* now? If so, what he wrote on the scroll would last forever—an idea that brought a smile to the young man's face.

"You're now a full-fledged magician, Yan. You practically know as much as me. One last thing that I need to remind you of: True power isn't in the excessive use of Will, but in how intelligently you use it. Magic doesn't put you above others. It makes you responsible for them."

Yan nodded, solemnly. He took Corenn's advice very seriously. He was no longer the naïve fisherman from a small Kaulien village. He was a man who had faced death, traveled across several countries, and tackled problems he never could have imagined. He had always been smart and now here he was, absorbing the wisdom of his ancestors.

"Good! Now, all we have to do is find you a name. It's customary," she noted, cheerfully. "What do you think about Yan the Curious?"

"Um... I don't know... isn't that kind of negative?" he responded, surprised.

"So Yan the Faithful then? By tradition, the master is the one who chooses her apprentice's name. But I wouldn't want to pick one that doesn't please you."

"The Curious will be fine then," he confirmed, frightened by the possibility of being called the Faithful.

He wondered how the Mother came up with these ideas. She had the habit of switching from serious conversations to friendly banter in an instant.

"Well, then. Let's go introduce ourselves to Zarbone, Yan the Curious. Formal introductions are customary for our fellowship of magicians."

They found the old man walking around his pens, boasting to the others about his climbing snakes, golden ibexes, and other rare animals that were the prize of his collection. Léti struggled to restrain Frog, who was dead set on greeting each and every animal. The dwarf cat was such a rebel that for a moment she thought about renaming it Reyan.

"Master Zarbone," the Mother announced, leading him aside. "I'm Corenn the Acute, and this is Yan the Curious. We're both earth

specialists.”

“Delighted to meet you,” the governor responded, playing along. “I’m Zarbone the Collector, of course. A wind specialist in my day. It’s been ages since I’ve practiced.”

They broke into a technical conversation, leaving the others to continue their tour. Yan rejoiced inside. For the first time in his life, he had completed an apprenticeship. He had a talent that was all his own, and he was part of a fellowship.

Finally, he had something to offer Léti.



Their visit with Zarbone was only a stop in their journey, and they didn’t want to jeopardize a man who had helped them so much. They would embark that very night for the Guoris’s Sacred Island. What he had taught them about Romine’s Deep Tower was enough to earn their profound gratitude.

Lana looked at these men and women as they prepared to leave. They had immediately accepted her as one of their own. Which, in reality she was, of course, since she was a descendant of the wise from Ji just like the rest of them. But her new friends all shared a common violence, a certain fury to live, which she didn’t think she had. She found herself almost envious of their drive and will.

To leave them was unthinkable. Sure, they carried weapons, and hardly gave a thought to the Moral of Eurydis, but she needed them, for their protection and their friendship.

Her preparations consisted solely of a long prayer, in which she confessed all her fears and regrets about exposing so many people to the dangers of a visit with Usul. She asked the Goddess to watch over them and to bring them peace of mind. She prayed that if things turned out badly that the Goddess at least protect the youngest in their group.

There was no particular ritual for a Eurydian prayer outside of the Temple. One could call on the Goddess from anywhere, as desired, as long as they did so respectfully. Lana was content to sit against a tree and close her eyes. When she opened them, she was surprised to see Léti at her side.

A strange spectacle she was, this young woman dressed in leather and steel, carrying a rapier and a knife, yet she ardently prayed to the Goddess

of peace. *Violence is not in our hearts*, she thought, *but in our memories...* Léti had been through so many trials.

The Maz gently placed a hand on Léti's shoulder, who pushed her hand away by reflex, before realizing, embarrassed, who had put it there.

"I'm sorry, I... I was just thinking about..."

"It's nothing," assured Lana, who could only imagine what difficult memories could be tormenting her. "We are all a little nervous. I just wanted to let you know I am heading back to the house."

"I'll come with you."

They found the others at Zarbone's house, where they had planned to eat a last meal together before leaving. The old man was morose. He had spent the entire day trying to dissuade them from going to see Usul, convinced that it would be the last time he would see them.

As for the heirs, they showed no signs of regret. They would leave their friend still *alive*, which was reason enough to rejoice. That night, they were convinced they would have their answers. That night, they would finally know the name of their enemy. They had been waiting for this moment for so long that the horrors mentioned in the legends about Usul seemed trivial.

Besides, Lana was a Maz. That also gave them confidence. Gods must have a certain respect for a Maz, right?

They had no idea, of course, that Lana was the most terrified of them all.

The heirs quickly finished their meal and returned to the *Othenor*. Zarbone accompanied them and bid them good luck on the beach. Grigán promised him that he would return as soon as possible, once they had resolved their problems. The old man refrained from reminding the warrior that he had been swimming in troubled waters for twenty years and still hadn't managed to find his way out yet.

Léti had to carry Frog all the way to the boat, since the cat wasn't amused at the idea of walking along a floating dock. As soon as they were aboard the sloop, he scampered toward the cabin, where he stayed for a long time, playing with the hammocks and blankets.

He was the only one who enjoyed himself. The others had a disturbing night.



Zarbone had given them a detailed map of this section of the Land of Beauty, but sailing at night was still perilous. The heirs didn't dare light any lanterns on the *Othenor*, and they only saw a few lights around them, coming from the largest islands in the vicinity. They glided onward, practically blindfolded, the pale light of the crescent moon as their only guidance.

Bowbaq felt his old fears return. The sea was more frightening at night. The threshold between the depths and the surface was no longer clear, and he imagined that they were drifting out into harsh, dark waters. He feared that they would never return. He tried to snap out of his troubled visions by hopping from one foot to the other—feeling the world's solid reality sometimes helped him feel better. But not tonight.

"I remember a legend from Arkary," he announced. "It claims that the moon's shadows reveal the true nature of things."

His friends waited silently for him to continue, curious where he was going with this, but Bowbaq had nothing more to add.

"Why are you telling us that?" Rey asked, finally.

"I didn't see the Mog'lur's shadow," he answered, sorrowfully. "I wonder if I might have seen the shadow of a child instead. Actually, I'm positive. I'm sure I saw a child's shadow."

"You have a mountain's shadow," Rey declared. His comment was as much a joke as it was an attempt to comfort his friend. "Demons would have to gather in hordes to bring you crumbling down."

The actor went right back to sharpening his rapier as if nothing had happened. Rey had swapped his expensive clothes for his old traveling attire. He was unusually serious, hinting that he too was dreading what was on the horizon. He had narrowly escaped death on Ji, and he planned on surviving the Guoris's Sacred Island the same way.

"You see how charming you can be," Lana whispered kindly in his ear.

"You have the shadow of a divinely beautiful woman. My shadow would love to get to know yours," he whispered back.

Lana smiled graciously, but it wasn't a warm smile. She walked away. What Rey was suggesting was impossible, even under more pleasant circumstances. As a Maz, she couldn't justify an affair with an atheist, no matter how tempting it was...

"Left!" Grigán whisper-yelled. "To the left!"

Yan corrected their course, trusting the warrior's eagle eyes. Grigán had taken position at the bow, almost lying flat on the deck, and was acting as their spotter. Corenn helped him by relaying directions from Zarbone's map. Their method had worked fine so far, but they still dreaded the possibility of getting lost or running aground on an unmarked sandbar.

"Look over there!" Léti said in a low voice. "There are moving lights!"

She was pointing to a group of lights five hundred yards to their starboard. These lights were different than the lights shining from the island residences that they had seen before. These ones were moving. It had to be a boat. A mercenary patroller.

As they had planned, Yan and Rey lowered the sail and let the *Othenor* glide in absolute silence. The mercenary ship continued on the same heading, putting distance between them. The heirs weren't out of danger yet. The *Othenor* might have drifted far off course.

"We've lost our way," Grigán announced frankly, once he had time to judge their position.

The next few moments seemed to crawl for everyone. If they were still going the right direction, they were supposed to see a cathedral of coral sometime very soon. Grigán spotted it finally, with a sigh of relief. It was nothing more than a six-foot-high mass sticking out of the water.

Corenn consulted the map again, even though by now she practically knew it by heart. They were getting close to the Guoris' Sacred Island. *Is this really a good idea?* she wondered, for the hundredth time. Then she recalled the threatening mysteries that surrounded and hampered their quest. The answers from Usul could be their salvation. Yes, they had to try it.

"Steer left after the coral, Yan," she whispered.

Yan executed the orders masterfully. He was simultaneously exhilarated and nervous, just like every time the heirs faced a turning point. Exhilarated by the joy of discovering, learning, living. He was nervous too because this new life full of experience could be cut short, or made painful if something bad were to happen to one of his friends, or to Léti...

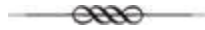
He watched the young woman tenderly. Like him, she had changed too. She had become stronger. Tougher. Made more mature by the trials she unwillingly had to endure. He hoped they hadn't changed so much that they would grow apart. For his part, he found her more captivating and beautiful



than ever. Learning magic was just a way that he could finally have a talent to offer her. He wanted to protect her, live with her, laugh with her, have children that were like her. He had always wanted that, and he still did.

It wasn't an obsession. Being with Léti was simply the only way he imagined happiness. Yan had no intention of harassing Léti her whole life if it turned out she had other plans. But on this dark night on a distant sea, as they were being hunted down by a powerful enemy with no place to hide, to Yan, concentrating on his hopes and dreams seemed like the best thing to do.

Léti turned to him and gave him an affectionate smile, almost as if she had heard his thoughts. Yes, he thought, with renewed determination. *The best thing to do.*



“We’ve arrived,” Grigán announced. “The island is right in front of us.”

The heirs wondered if Grigán had actually spotted something or spoke from intuition. He was the only one who could see anything. As the *Othenor* closed in, they could discern the rough shape of the island a few hundred yards ahead of them as it emerged piece by piece on the dark horizon.

Bowbaq candidly remarked, “It’s smaller than Ji.”

“That will only make finding Usul that much easier,” Rey joked. “All we have to do is stand on the beach and yell, ‘Hey! Is there a god somewhere around here? Or is that the next island over?’”

Lana shuddered at this latest blasphemy. Even though she was the one who had had the idea in the first place, she couldn’t believe that they were going to meet with a *god*. She was convinced that gods existed, but it was one thing to pray to them in the quiet confines of a temple; it was quite another to directly address an eternal being in the flesh.

Implicitly, they had designated her as the group’s representative to speak to Usul. She had scrupulously memorized the list of questions Corenn had prepared. *She* would soon speak with a god and was paralyzed by fear.

Yan slowed the *Othenor*, following Grigán’s advice. The Guoris could have set up some beams, rocks, or other pitfalls to sink any boat that ignored the interdiction, so at an aching slow pace, the sloop approached the island.

They did their best to peer through the darkness, but the interior remained indiscernible. The only thing they could perceive was the edge between the vegetation and the beach.

The heirs hoped that the Guoris had abandoned the island to let it fall into obscurity, perhaps thinking that what is available to everyone interests no one. For the next generation, all that would be left would be a few legends of Usul. But until then, the natives had made such an effort to keep everyone away that such a drastic change in methods seemed improbable. They must have found a better way to keep people away from the god.

The sloop was soon close enough for Rey to drop anchor. They couldn't risk approaching any closer and running aground. The beach was 150 yards away. Grigán plumbed the depth and decided it was best that they take the dinghy to shore, much to Bowbaq's relief. He didn't want to plunge into those dark waters.

The small boat was just large enough for four people, so Yan needed two trips to bring everyone to shore. Grigán, Léti, and Rey took the first boat, weapons in hand and senses alert. The others soon joined them.

Bowbaq lit two lanterns that he had altered following the warrior's advice: Two large planks of wood masked the light from one side to partially reflect it back out the other. The giant took one and gave the other to Yan.

"Don't forget to point your light inland," Grigán reminded them. "And don't hold them too high. We just need enough light to see where we're stepping. Not to signal all of the Land of Beauty."

The group left the beach, Yan in the front, covered by Grigán and his bow. Lana followed, protected by Rey and his crossbow. Then came Bowbaq, Corenn, and finally Léti, who brought up the rear. They had adopted this strategic formation without having to discuss it. Grigán also noticed that each of them tried to walk as silently as possible, without him needing to remind them. His companions had learned a lot, he thought to himself with a certain sense of satisfaction at their progress.

Supposedly, Usul was at the island's summit, and they headed in that direction. No more than twenty yards in, they had to stop.

"I found a carcass," Yan warned them in a hoarse voice.

Grigán squatted down to examine the putrid animal, a colony of maggots squirming out of its bloated body. It was a large adult auroch. The

beast was almost intact, except for dozens of small cuts that covered its body, maybe made by scavengers after its death.

Troubled by the sight, Bowbaq said, “There shouldn’t be any aurochs here. How can that be?”

“But there isn’t an auroch here, Bowbaq,” Rey responded. “At least not a living one.”

Lana inquired in a quavering voice, “How did it die? Sickness?”

“Maybe,” the warrior answered. “Well, let’s get going. I would like to get off this island as soon as possible.”

Grigán had seen a good number of carcasses in his life, but he had never heard of any sickness that left an animal completely drained of blood. This island had at least one species of vampire, bat or otherwise.

He didn’t think it mattered enough to trouble his companions with this detail. For once, the warrior was wrong.



The creature tossed and turned in its sleep. Many spirits were thinking about it right now, and some of them were very powerful. It could hear them, even as it drifted into the deepest of dreams.

It dreamed of crossing the sea, flying through the night, tasting the fear and suffering of humanity. What a pleasant dream it was. But there were other images too: those of children, a valley, a portal, and other things it didn’t understand or remember flashed through its mind. They interrupted the dream. It didn’t like the emotions the images brought. Its hate for humanity grew. It banished those dreams and went searching for spirits that continuously talked, like a buzzing noise in the back of its mind.

It immediately detected its friend’s spirit and admired its intensity, though that wasn’t the one it was looking for. It sifted through a thousand others, rejecting them disdainfully. None of them deserved its attention. It continued hunting, gliding through thousands of other spirits that were just as talkative, insipid, and boring. It partially woke from its sleep to force itself to listen better until it finally found something interesting—the spirits of the humans it would soon kill. They hated it. Feared it. The creature welcomed their hate, rejoicing in it, and drew new strength from their scorn.

If the creature were to wake up completely, it could kill one or two of those humans with a thought, but doing so would cause it to sleep for a long

time afterward, a very long time. And that wouldn't be any fun. Its last escapade in the land of mortals had given it a taste for blood. A distraction like any other. And the creature was so bored, and searching for distractions...

It let itself slip into sleep again, relishing the good days to come. It would soon be strong enough to not have to sleep. It grew stronger every day.

As it listened, almost completely asleep now, it felt another thinking spirit turn toward it. This spirit was close to its human enemies, but wasn't human. A spirit with enormous powers, much more powerful than its own.

The creature recognized this new spirit and woke up completely this time. *Usul*. Now it remembered. It remembered every single moment. And hatred overwhelmed the deepest parts of its being as it unleashed a cry of pain and anger into the night.



“Did you hear that?”

Grigán stopped the column and listened to the sounds emanating from the Sacred Island's tropical forest. He could only hear the hooting of a few nocturnal birds and the cacophonous chirping of a dozen or so species of insomniac insects.

“What did you hear?” he asked Lana, who had sounded the alarm.

“I don't know, to be honest,” the Maz said, apologetically. “I want to say a scream. I must be mistaken. Forgive me, I'm too nervous.”

“No need to apologize; it's better to give a false alarm than to ignore a real one. Don't hesitate to do it again.”

The group resumed their progression and forgot the incident—all except for Lana, who thought she could still hear the scream echoing in the air. With time she forgot it too, her attention shifting to the difficulties of this nocturnal march, and to her approaching encounter with *Usul*. It would be the most important moment of her life, and perhaps the last.

The heirs hadn't found out yet how the Guoris were guarding their Sacred Island. Up until this point, it had all been too easy, and a new fear whittled at their confidence: What if there was *nothing* to guard? What if the island had no more gods than it did flying margolins?

With these pessimistic thoughts on their minds, they arrived at the first incline to the island's summit. They had made it to the center of the island, and the biggest animal they had seen was a cowardly little mimastin monkey. The island was deserted, but the void feeling was more frightening than if men had been patrolling the forest.

Grigán studied the mountain of rocks and sand that he would normally have just called a "hill" on the continent. Vegetation clung to the mountain three-quarters of the way up, and then abruptly stopped, leaving rocks to dominate the summit. From that high up, the lights they carried would be seen. If there was any danger to be had, they would soon find out.

"Put out your lantern, Bowbaq," he said. "We are going to use only one."

The giant complied while Yan wrapped a cloth around his lantern, dimming the light. A chill swept through Bowbaq's body as darkness enveloped the group. He marched with fists held tight, jumping at the slightest sound or suspicious movement.

The climb wasn't difficult since the slope was moderate and the plants could be used as handholds, but the heirs advanced with such precaution that it took them as long to reach the edge of the vegetation as it had taken for them to get to the bottom of the hill.

The rocky summit was only fifty feet ahead, and there was still no trace of Usul, or of anything else. Sensing Grigán's hesitation to put the group at risk, Corenn resolutely scaled toward the top and was soon followed by the rest of the procession.

The mountain must have been a volcano several eons before, but the only remaining evidence was a few scattered rifts in the rock and a layer of solidified magma that had been cold since the Two Empires.

"Usul would come to meet us, if he were a polite host," Rey mumbled. "For now, I have no desire to pay him the honor of a future visit."

Corenn responded, "It would surprise me if we ever had the occasion, anyhow."

No one dared to ask what the Mother meant by that. Something none of them wanted to hear was Corenn confessing her fears about their future. They needed her to be their confident, reassuring leader.

Before they realized it, they were at the summit. It was more or less a flat plateau about thirty yards in diameter. Grigán spent a long time scouting

their surroundings, his bow taut with an arrow that had been notched since they left the *Othenor*.

"There's nothing here," Rey commented with disappointment. "Uuu-suuul!" he called out once, and then a second time, louder, "We're here! You have visitors!"

"Quiet!" Grigán ordered in a tone that he hadn't used in a long time. "Do you really want us to be spotted?"

"But there's no one here, my dear friend. No one!"

Léti approached Lana with a sad expression. She didn't want to admit another failure, another blighted hope. "Maz," she asked respectfully. "Where is Usul? Why isn't he here?"

Lana slowly shrugged her shoulders, embarrassed by her ignorance. What could she say to the young woman who had trusted her completely?

Yan suddenly broke the silence and announced, "I found something. Be careful as you come near."

"What is it? Another carcass?" Rey asked.

"Look for yourself."

The heirs gathered behind the young man, who carried their only lit lantern. Yan lowered it closer to the ground, exposing the rocky edges of a well that appeared to go deep into the ground. He cautiously explored the edges and told them it was four feet wide.

"We could have fallen in," Corenn remarked, the fear obvious in her voice. "I should have known that at the top of an ancient volcano, there has to be a fissure..."

"Do you think Usul is inside?"

They all turned toward Maz Lana to get the opinion of their specialist. So much unearned confidence made her uncomfortable. She confessed, "I don't know. Maybe."

"For a Maz, you don't have much faith," Rey responded.

"You are right. I have always believed that gods live among men. And I have always believed that Usul is held prisoner in the Land of Beauty. So yes... He Who Knows is down there."

The heirs circled the well, curiosity overwhelming their fear as they peered down. Léti threw a pebble into the well, to Bowbaq's dismay. The superstitious giant saw it as an *impolite* sacrilege that could only bring them misfortune. The rock hit a liquid surface less than five feet below.

Grigán, frustrated, announced, “It is completely flooded. This well could be as deep as the hill, but we would never know.”

They stared down the dark hole, growing more disappointed. They would have to do without Usul’s divine knowledge.

The water began to bubble up inexplicably, followed by a burst of water that shot over their heads, drenching them with spray. It was over as quickly as it had started.

“It’s a sign,” Lana exclaimed, suddenly very excited. “Usul is sending us a sign!”

“It’s a natural phenomenon,” Grigán disagreed. “There’s nothing miraculous about it. A simple coincidence.”

Yan studied his friends’ faces, their indecision obvious, and then contemplated the dark chasm that might contain all the answers. It was one of those moments in life where a single decision could determine an entire destiny. He set the lantern down.

“I’m going down,” he announced, as he took off his shoes.

“Are you crazy?” Léti reacted. “You aren’t going down there! At least wait until it’s daytime.”

Grigán reminded her, “We can’t take that risk. We need to leave the Land of Beauty before dawn.”

“I will just go down a few feet below the surface,” Yan explained, as he continued undressing. “If there is a god below, he has to talk to me, right? If not, we’re stuck.”

Yan was scaring himself. He couldn’t believe what he was saying, what he was getting ready to do.

“I’m supposed to be the one who goes,” Lana declared in a shaky voice. “I’m supposed to take the risk.”

“Do you know how to swim?” Yan asked, continuing to undress.

The Maz didn’t respond. She wanted to lie, but that would have been stupid. If she went into the well, she would drown.

“I do; I know how to swim. I’ll go,” Léti offered.

“Too late,” the young man said as he sat on the edge of the hole. “I’m already going.”

“Wait,” Grigán ordered as he pulled out a thick, long rope from Bowbaq’s sack, a provision he had bought from Raji. Yan understood and wrapped the rope around his body, securing it under his arms, while Grigán tied the other end to a large rock.

The young man turned and smiled at each of his friends. Only Corenn and Rey returned his smile, but only to encourage him. The others wore defeated expressions, filled with doubt.

Then Yan pushed the rest of his body into the void and began to climb down the well. The last time he had embarked on a similar effort, it was to save Léti. But wasn't that the point this time too?

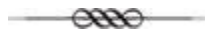
His left foot felt the water's surface, and he let himself slip down into the water slowly, unable to stop himself from imagining that some aquatic monster was waiting for him, just waiting to drown him in the depths, and then devour him.

"It's cold!" he yelled toward the top of the well, toward the light, toward his friends, out of reach. "See you soon!"

And he dove.

Léti, Corenn, Grigán, Bowbaq, Rey, and Lana counted the lapse of time that separated them from their friend. All their attention was focused on the dark chasm that had just swallowed Yan.

They didn't notice the many pairs of red eyes, circling around them, growing more and more numerous, coming closer and closer. Thirsty for fresh blood.



Yan opened his eyes even though it was useless. It was pitch-black. He couldn't even see his hand when he waved it right in front of his face. He decided to continue into the watery depths, using the rocky walls to push his way down headfirst, fearing his forehead would smack into something solid at any moment.

Though the rope was a little uncomfortable, it was reassuring. The young man hoped to find an air pocket in some underground cave farther down where Usul would be waiting for him. If that turned out not to be the case, he didn't know what he would do. He could already feel the nagging need for air, but he forced himself to continue his descent anyway.

He figured he must have dived ten yards below the surface by now, perhaps even more, and he still hadn't found a side tunnel leading to an underwater cave. The unpleasant thought came to him that he might have to make several descents to make sure he hadn't missed anything. But, for now, the best thing to do was to make it to the bottom, so he swam on.



The well narrowed, and the walls became smoother and harder to grip. Occasionally, Yan experienced strange sensations in his feet and hands, like something touching him. He hoped they were underwater currents and not some threatening life form. He was beginning to lose hope of finding Usul, yet he forced himself to keep diving.

He felt like he had left the world behind. How deep was he? In the midst of total darkness, the rope was the only thing that still reminded him which way was up. He was starting to feel intoxicated from the lack of air. He forced himself on, and gave one last forceful breaststroke.

His face hit something, and he panicked. It was just sand. He felt around to make sure. He had reached the bottom.

His felt his diaphragm spasm, begging for air. He peered into the darkness, but saw no better than when his eyes were closed. He pushed off the sand with his hands, maneuvering to make the ascent...

A deep, contemptuous voice suddenly intruded his mind, filling him with terror stronger than he had ever known.

*It would be stupid to have made it all the way down here just to give up now,* boomed Usul. *We have a lot to talk about, you and I.*



Lana couldn't contain a cry of terror when she noticed, before anyone else, the glowing eyes spying on them from the darkness. The heirs momentarily forgot about the well to deal with their own problem. It was looking serious. Fifty or so pairs of eyes surrounded them.

"Don't move, whatever you do," Grigán whispered as he slowly stepped toward the lantern.

He delicately pulled off the cloth that had been covering the lantern, which revealed enough light to illuminate the first few members of the curious pack, before they scurried back into darkness. The heirs had seen enough to get an idea as to the danger they faced—even Grigán had goose bumps.

The spies looked like enormous rats, standing more than two feet tall on their hind legs. They had two enormous incisors that protruded from a withering muzzle. On their faces they wore a bloodthirsty look, which made them look almost like deformed children. Their front paws had claws that they deployed and retracted like a nervous tic. Worst of all, a few of them

looked crippled, which suggested that they weren't just scavengers, but *predators*.

"What are they?" Léti whispered to Bowbaq. "They're huge."

"I don't know," the giant confessed, his voice cracking. "Grigán?"

"I've never heard of anything like them. It might be a species from the Eastian Kingdoms."

"The Guoris could have at least warned people about this nice setup," Rey complained.

"They might have done so," Corenn explained. "Each Guori surely knows how dangerous it is to visit the Sacred Island. And now we do too..."

Grigán slowly gripped his curved blade. Léti did the same with her rapier. Rey pointed his crossbow at the red eyes and said, "Maybe we can scare them off?"

"Do they look scared to you?" Grigán said.

In fact, the vampire rats, now emboldened by their growing number, were approaching the edge of the lit area in little hops. A few started a strange dance, scampering around the circle of light.

"They're fast," Léti said, swallowing hard.

"They look tough," Corenn added, grimly. She almost added: If they attack, we're done for.

For now, Bowbaq felt it most wise to keep his mace in hand. Grigán handed a dirk to Corenn, who accepted it reluctantly, and another to Lana, who completely refused.

"I am telling you to take it," the warrior commanded. "If one of these little beasts jumps at your throat, you will be happy you have it."

The Maz took the weapon with disgust, as if it were one of the beasts itself, awkward in both hands. The rats grew more and more agitated, and now she prayed fervently to Eurydis. *Everyone must die one day*, she thought. *But not like this. Not devoured by these creatures.*

One of the rats started a strange, piercing call. Soon, all the others followed its lead, causing a dreadful racket, a squealing chorus that was fifty voices strong.

"Prepare yourselves," the warrior warned. "We have to try something."

The heirs got ready to put up a fierce fight; the rats would have to pay dearly to get a taste of their blood. Léti wasn't sure of herself. She had

learned to fight against humans, but what could she do against an army of fast, strong, and hungry animals?

“Rey,” Grigán called out. “Try shooting one that’s the farthest away. You’re a good-enough shot. With a bit of luck, they will turn on each other.”

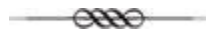
The actor shouldered his crossbow, deciding not to bring up the fact that Grigán had just shown him such unprecedented respect and trust. This wasn’t the time to worry about their relationship.

“I hope they don’t have much for family values,” he whispered to himself as he pulled the trigger.

One of the rats cried out in pain, and the piercing squeal stopped. The injured vampire rat rolled on the ground, momentarily clawing frantically at the air. The others turned their heads and watched it from afar. Finally, two of the beasts launched an assault on the injured one, seeing it as easy prey. The rat ferociously fought them off and forced its brethren to retreat. They weren’t determined enough to fight such a battle for so little blood.

The injured rat stood up with great difficulty and cried out, showing its strength to the others. Another crossbow bolt stuck right through it, and still the rat was just as aggressive.

The vampires realized their prey were powerless against them and began closing in on the heirs.



Yan needed air. Right now. He felt like his lungs would burst at any moment. He knew that if he didn’t start his ascent immediately, he would end up breathing in water and drowning.

Usul had spoken to him, though. Usul, the *god*. He Who Knows. So Yan hesitated to swim to the surface, and this moment of indecisiveness could have sealed his fate. Maybe this was what people meant when they said the *danger of curiosity*, a thirst for knowledge so great that it could lead men to their death.

Suddenly, the yearning for air vanished. Yan floated in the darkness, no longer debating whether to swim to the surface. He sank back down, and his feet touched the sand again. He stood there in shock, thinking he had drowned, wondering if he were truly dead or in a state of complete

delirium. Could he have imagined Usul's voice, a final delusion before his death? He no longer knew if it was in fact all a dream.

*Humans are so predictable, the god stated, regretfully. So boring. Not a single one of you has made it this far without having the same thought. No originality.*

Yan opened his mouth to answer, forgetting for a moment where he was. Water rushed in. By reflex, he spit it back out, surprised it didn't cause him a coughing fit. Then he remembered that he was breathing underwater against all the laws of nature.

*Do you hear me?* he thought, feeling ridiculous. *Are you the one who's keeping me from drowning?*

*Of course. Do you have that power? Obviously not. The rest of the world is off-limits to me, but here, I am master. As such, I advise you not to do anything to make me change my mind.*

Yan was having a hard time digesting all this. Had he really just started a conversation with a god? It was the most incredible thing he had ever experienced.

*Where are you?*

*You want to see me? Usually humans regret asking that. Are you sure?*  
*Yes.*

*Good! This will be entertaining.*

Yan's vision clouded as the water brightened. He wondered if it was really becoming lighter or if just his perception was changing. It didn't really matter, either way.

The walls turned golden, as if the well were dug straight into a vein of the precious metal. He realized the well ended in an underwater cave, as he had expected. The cave was at least as large as the base of the hill above, but with his distorted vision, he couldn't be sure. He scanned in all directions, searching for Usul.

At first he thought the cave held no trace of life, until he spotted some sort of fish in the distance. He continued looking around, without detecting anything else. He turned back toward the approaching fish. Yan screamed a cry silenced by the still water.

The creature looked small at a distance, but up close, it was enormous and terrifying. It was a Talanté shark, more than ten yards long. The predator swam straight at him, only to swerve to his right at the last possible moment, leaving Yan paralyzed in fear.

*Sharks don't live in freshwater!* he yelled in his mind, as loud as he could.

*You'll just have to believe what I already said, then. I'm all-powerful here,* Usul mocked.

Yan tried to calm down. Apparently, the god didn't plan on killing him. Not right away, in any case.

*Is that really what you look like?*

The god paused before answering, *Do you really wish to ask me that question?*

*I don't understand.*

*I'm He Who Knows, or so humans call me,* he recited as if it were a rehearsed speech. *I have always known the destiny of everything in this universe. But my knowledge has a price. If you want answers, you have to earn them.*

*How?* Yan asked, worried.

*By entertaining me. I suffer the most dreadful boredom any thinking spirit has ever known... time is my true prison. I watch each day go by, like a grain of sand dropping into an eternal hourglass, and I always know how the grain will fall. The humans that come to see me are my only source of the unexpected.*

Yan watched the shark-god circling him. As he listened to Usul, he discreetly made sure he was still tied to the rope.

*Only people who know their destiny are able to modify it. They're the only agents of the unknown. And the unknown entertains me. For each question that you ask me, I will give you two answers. The second will reveal something about your future.*

*If you've always known the future, how can it change?*

*Because it becomes uncertain as soon as it's revealed. It's possible to stumble into your ordained destiny even though you were trying to avoid it, or hoping to change it with all your heart. Anything that involves myself remains completely unknown to me. I was expecting your visit, but I don't know how it will turn out. When you arrived, the future misted over, for you, for me, for your friends, and even for a significant part of the rest of the world.*

*What if I don't do anything? If, despite your revelations, I act as I always have, just as before?*

*You can't do nothing. As soon as you know, you act differently. Not doing anything is still doing something.*

Yan tried to gather his thoughts. He was going to have to select his questions very carefully. He had no desire to be burdened with this curse of human knowledge more than he had to, a curse whose nature he understood completely now.

*I understand the rules, he announced internally. I accept. Let's begin.*



Grigán sprinted out in front of the first few vampires and butchered three with a single swipe of his blade. But other rats attacked him just as ferociously.

Bowbaq took it on himself to protect Corenn and Lana behind his spinning mace. A few rats fell into the well, and Corenn couldn't help but think of the danger Yan would face if these beasts could swim. The situation was already desperate enough above ground that she could hardly focus on Yan for now.

Two rats lunged up and clung to Bowbaq's arms, scratching and biting him. He tore them off with a groan and broke their necks in his powerful hands. From then on the vampires stopped attacking him this way, but it wasn't going so well for the other heirs.

Grigán had thrown himself into the heart of the battle, tracing a bloody circle in the vampires' ranks. The creatures were so voracious that they relentlessly clung to his every limb, biting and clawing, even when they were severed in half. Their teeth pierced his leather armor, and their claws found their way between the plates of protective metal underneath. It took Grigán only a few moments to fell fifteen of the beasts, but he had received more than thirty wounds, large and small. He retreated toward Bowbaq.

Léti and Rey fought side by side, protecting each other. *Firm footing*, the young woman thought as she sent one of them flying with a kick. *Sharp mind*, she told herself as she sliced two rats that were standing too close to her with a single strike. *Steady hand*, she finished, as she impaled a beast in midair that was flying toward her throat.

Concentrating on Grigán's lessons helped her to stay calm in the heat of battle. She let the battle rage overcome her only once, at which point her fury for combat surpassed her skill and she exposed herself too much. She

recovered quickly and collected herself to fight more effectively, more skillfully, and with a control that surprised even her.

It soon became obvious that they wouldn't get the upper hand. Seeing Grigán retreat, Léti did the same, followed by Rey. The rats waited to launch another attack, regrouping as they had before, circling their prey.

"They're going to end up feasting on each other, right?" a breathless Rey asked the group.

Like his friends, the actor was bleeding from many wounds on his arms, legs, and face. A rat carcass still clung to his calf. With a curse, Rey painfully ripped the tenacious rat from his skin and tossed it toward its brethren.

The surviving vampires sniffed at the carcasses and then violently seized them, slurping the blood of the dying and injured—a horrible sucking sound coming from the piles of dead rats.

"There are more coming," Léti warned in a broken voice.

Grigán had seen them too. They had fought off an army of fifty rats, but there were at least two hundred more climbing the hill, galvanized by the smell of a feast.

"They won't be satisfied with the carcasses," Bowbaq commented, surprisingly calm.

Grigán grabbed the lantern and lit the second one.

"Try to light a fire," he said as he grabbed a dead vampire rat. "A large circle of flames around you."

"Grigán, what are you doing?" Corenn asked, worried.

"I'm going to buy us some time!"

And he walked away with slow strides, carrying the lantern in one hand and the carcass and his scimitar in the other. The rats smelled the blood as he walked by and turned their heads toward him. Two beasts took off after him, and then ten, thirty, and then nearly the whole vampire swarm followed behind, enticed by the chase.

"Come back, Grigán! I beg you!" Corenn pleaded, almost in tears.

But the warrior was already out of earshot.



*What is your first question, young human?*

Yan reflected on his choices, his heart racing. He didn't want Usul to reveal anything too important about his future. He decided to start with a simple question, to judge how dangerous Usul's responses would be; the question that had brought them to the Sacred Island in the first place.

*Where is the journal of Maz Achem of Ith, Maz Lana's ancestor?*

*Easy. The answer won't be extremely useful to you, so I'm only going to reveal some minor event about your existence. You will take your friend Léti in Union.*

Yan had difficulty managing the shock. All sorts of emotions flooded his mind. That was a minor event? What would the other revelations be! Take Léti in Union? The future changed once it was revealed! Would this happen or not?

He now understood Usul's curse perfectly well. He had an urge to swim back up to his friends right then, to carry on a normal life with a future full of the unexpected. These same friends were counting on him, though. Usul was their only chance at finding the information that could help them survive. Survive, yes, but with a tortured mind...

*Where is Maz Achem's journal?* Yan repeated, trying to master his emotions.

*In the secret archives under the Grand Temple of Eurydis, my sister, in the Holy City of Ith. I could give you the exact location, but I'm sure you'll find it if you go there.*

How ironic! Lana had traveled thousands of leagues looking for it, and the whole time it was right under her nose. Ith would definitely be one of their next stops.

Yan considered asking if the journal really did contain valuable information, but decided against it. He had to be more direct. The price for answers was too high. He decided he would ask just two more questions.

*Where does the portal on Ji lead to?*

*An important question!* the god commented, to Yan's despair. *"Since the answer concerns all humans, I'm going to reveal an event that involves the future of many. But don't think I'm letting you off the hook: Your future is inextricably tied to this event. Your actions could profoundly alter it. I've rarely met a human with such an influential destiny."*

*So what is this important revelation?* Yan quickly asked. The shark's proximity was making him increasingly nervous and impatient. He couldn't



understand how a god could get any entertainment from taking such a form, but it was clear that Usul tried to amuse himself however he could.

*What you call the known world will soon be torn apart by a bloody war. None of your peoples will be spared from it. Both the Kaul Matriarchy and the Upper Kingdoms in general will bear the brunt of it. It will happen in less than a year.*

*A year! But a war between who? And why?*

*Are those questions you really want to ask?*

*No.*

This conversation was agonizing. Yan felt a furious urge to hurt this spiteful messenger. Then he remembered where he was, who he was, and who was swimming in front of him.

*Here's your answer, Usul continued. What lies on the other side of the portal is Jal'dara. Or Jal'karu, if you prefer.*

*And? That's hardly any information!*

*The answer is more than sufficient. I warn you. In asking about portals, you're asking me to directly reveal the secrets of the gods. We have no tolerance for sacrilege. I promised I would answer, and I have. Do not push me.*

Yan didn't need him to repeat it. Maybe it really was sufficient after all. Lana had mentioned Jal'karu before as the land where demons are born and grow up. Their quest was taking a hopeless turn.

*I have only one more question. But before I ask, I would like to know what you're going to do to me afterward.*

*I've decided to let you go back up. You've been insolent several times; however, the role you will play in determining the future is significant enough to have sparked my interest. I'm even going to offer you a gift. Do you accept?*

*What is it?*

*You won't know until the moment is right. Do you accept?*

*Is it a revelation?*

*No.*

*All right, I accept,* Yan stated, nevertheless worried he might regret it immediately.

The shark approached him slowly, as he had done several times before. This time he didn't swerve around him, though. The young man

forced himself to not move. The predator did nothing more than brush against him, sliding his whole body along the young man's left arm.

*There. It's done.*

*What did you do to me? I don't feel any different.*

*You won't know until the moment is right, I said. Ask your last question.*

The young man gathered his courage. It was his most important question. *Who sent the Züu after us?*

*Hmm... that's too easy. My answer will help you a lot. It will cost you dearly, very dearly. Are you sure you want to know?*

*You aren't going to announce my own death, are you?*

*No, no. That lost its fun a long time ago. It's something else. Do you accept?*

*Go ahead, Yan answered, his heart beating out of his chest.*

*Your friend Grigán will die within a year. Now that you know, what will the future be? I wonder...*

The news floored Yan. He hardly heard Usul when he announced their enemy's name. It suddenly seemed much less important.



Bowbaq helped the exhausted young man climb out of the well. Léti, Rey, Corenn, and Lana circled around him, anxiously waiting to hear his revelations. Yan saw the circle of flames they had lit, the rat carcasses, and the red eyes shining on the other side of the protective fire.

"Where's Grigán?" he asked, worried.

Léti burst into tears, and Lana brought Yan over to the inanimate warrior. He suffered from several cuts, a few that were frighteningly deep. They covered his body and even his face.

"Is he dead?"

"Only unconscious," Corenn answered in a trembling voice. "He practically sacrificed himself for us."

"He's sick," Rey added. "A few of those beasts had strange eyes. The wounds won't kill him, but we must bring him to a healer as quickly as possible to be treated for poison."

Yan nodded his head sadly, knowledge already cursing him.

Corenn finally asked, "Did you see Usul?"

“Yes. Our enemy is Saat the Treasurer.”

“One of the original wise emissaries to Ji?” the Mother gasped, in shock. “He’s still alive...”

Yan sat next to the warrior and stared at his body, saddened by the sight. He didn’t feel like talking now. But he had so much to tell them...

## SHORT ANECDOTAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE KNOWN WORLD

**Alt** – The largest river in the known world. Its headwaters are located in the highest of the Curtain Mountains. It crosses the Ithare Kingdom and the Grand Empire before reaching its delta in the Ocean of Mirrors.

A Goranese legend claims that when the time has come, the dead will float down the river in gigantic phantom boats and take revenge upon those who have committed atrocities toward their living kin. Every once in a while, someone claims they've seen the vanguard of the dark army. Some harbors even refuse all embarkations after nightfall.

**Apogee** – The moment when the sun is at its highest point: noon, in our world. It's commonly accepted that the end of the third deciday marks the apogee.

**Arque** – Native of the Arkary Kingdom. It's also the main language spoken in this land.

**Bells (of Leem)** – At one point in time, Leem experienced such a crime wave that the city seemed to be completely overrun by thieves, pillagers, arsonists, and murderers of all shapes and colors. Although the city doubled the guards' night rounds, and then tripled them, the criminals remained untouchable, since they were too well organized.

The provost at the time then came up with the idea of installing a bell in the house of each of the most prominent people in the city. When these important people were threatened by or witness to a crime, they could ring the bell and the city guard would come right away. Most of the time it wasn't quickly enough, with the villains fleeing the scene the moment the first strike sounded. But it was still better than before.

More modest citizens followed this example, and soon there were quite a few artisans and merchants who had equipped their shops with a

bell. After a few years, there were so many bells in Leem that crime nearly disappeared.

Unfortunately, the criminals found a countermeasure: setting fire to each house that dared to ring its bell, as an act of vengeance and as a warning.

Today, there are still more than six hundred houses in Leem fitted with bells, but now the bronze only rings during the occasional festivity.

**Brosda** – A divinity whose cult is especially widespread in the Kaul Matriarchy. Brosda is the son of Xéfalis, and Echora's reflection.

**Brothers (of the night)** – What the members of the Grand Guild call themselves, as do members of any guild of thugs in general. Some of them even go as far as renaming their new members, creating fake "families," etc.

**Calendar** – The one used in the Upper Kingdoms is the Ithare calendar. It contains 338 days, which are divided into thirty-four dékades and four seasons. The year begins with the Day of Water, which also marks the first day of spring. There are two dékades that contain only nine days instead of the usual ten: those preceding the Day of the Earth and the Day of Fire. Each day on the calendar begins with the sunrise.

Every day, as well as every décade, carries a meaningful name originating from the cult of the goddess Eurydis; the moralist priests of the Wise One brought their nomenclature to the furthest reaches of the known world. But time and use brought about changes of varying degrees depending on the region. The Day of the Dog, for example, which the Grand Empire doesn't observe with any particular importance, was renamed the Day of the Wolf in the area around Tolensk, and corresponds to a feast day that all the locals really look forward to. Similarly, the Décade of Fairs, kicked off by the Day of the Merchant, is well-known and will ever be so to the Loreliens, whereas it represents nothing to the Mémissiens.

Few know all the days of the calendar, and even fewer know what they represent for the cult of Eurydis—priests aside, of course. In the Upper Kingdoms, they use it very naturally, as they would talk of the day or the night, yet a lot of people are completely unaware of its religious origin.

Other calendars are used in the known world; they arise out of royal decrees, from other cults besides that of Eurydis, or quite simply out of tribal tradition. Many of them are based on the lunar cycle, like the ancient Roman calendar: thirteen cycles of twenty-six days.

**Centiday** – A unit of time of Goranese origin representing one-tenth of a deciday: approximately fourteen earthly minutes.

**Council of Mothers** – The main governing body of the Kaul Matriarchy. Each of the villages has such a council, presided over by the elected Mother and advised by the Ancestress.

**Curtain** – The Curtain is the mountain chain that separates the Grand Empire of Goran and the Ithare Kingdom from the countries to the east.

**Dékade** (pronounced “day-cahd”) – Ten days. A division specific to the Eurydian calendar. The days of each dékade are named in chronological order. The first day is prime, the last is term. The other days, from second to ninth, are: dès, terce, quart, quint, sixt, septime, octes, and nones.

The dékades of Earth and Fire, which only contain nine days, don’t have an “octes” day. In these dékades, the calendar skips directly from septime to nones. The Maz have provided a religious explanation: The omission of octes symbolizes the victory of Eurydis over Xétame’s eight dragons.

**Deciday** – A unit of time of Goranese origin representing one-tenth of a day: approximately two hours and twenty-five minutes in our world. The first deciday begins with the sunrise, the instant at which the tenth deciday of the previous day ends. The apogee generally falls around the end of the third deciday.

This unit of time is used crudely by the ignorant, but a lot more precisely by the learned people in all nations, who do not use a common sundial for reference, but rather consult calculations indicating the position at which the sun rises relative to the city of Goran, and make adjustments depending on the season. This is also the only method that enables one to discern precisely when the change between the night decidays, from the seventh to the eighth, occurs.

**Dona** – First and foremost, Dona is the goddess of merchants. The daughter of Wug and Ivie, legend has it that Dona created gold so that she could cover herself with it and thereby exceed her cousin Isée’s beauty. She then gifted humans with her creation so that those like her, upon whom destiny endowed a less favorable lot, could outshine others with their intelligence, with the possession of this precious metal acting as a testimony.

Unfortunately for Dona, the young god Hamsa, whom she had chosen as referee, renewed his admiration for Isée. Dona then resolved to disregard

the singular opinion and became renowned for her parade of lovers. And so she also became the goddess of pleasure.

There's a Lorelien custom that requires a merchant who has just made a lucrative deal to give an offering to a stranger, and more specifically a young, impoverished-looking woman. They call the offering "Dona's share." Unfortunately, the custom is dying out, since the members of the cult feel that the share they routinely offer to their temples is in itself a sufficient display of piety.

No successful merchant would ever forget to glorify Dona with his gifts, if only to preserve the affection of a few "priestesses" who are particularly devout to the goddess of pleasure.

**Eastian** – A Levantine. A native of the lands that lie to the east of the Curtain Mountains.

**Emaz** – The chief figureheads and high leaders of the Grand Temple of Eurydis; in other words, the heads of the entire cult. There are thirty-four Emaz. Each Emaz reserves the power to pass on his or her title to a chosen Maz.

**Erjak** – An Arque title given to an individual who has the ability to communicate with animals from mind to mind.

**Eurydis** – The chief deity in the Upper Kingdoms. The cult of Eurydis has spread to even the most remote areas of the known world, at the instigation of Ithare "moralists."

The legend of the Goddess has forever been tied to the history of the Holy City. During the sixth Eon, the Ithare people—who didn't yet carry this name—were merely a colorful grouping of more or less nomadic tribes, assembled at the foot of Mount Fleuri, one of the old summits of the Curtain Mountains. It is said that the people first came together thanks to the vision of one man, King Li'ut of the Iths, who wanted to create a powerful new nation by bringing together all of the independent clans residing east of the Alt River.

King Li'ut dedicated his entire life to this dream, but the building of the city of Ith—the Holy City, as it is now more commonly called—took more time than he had. With Li'ut gone, ancestral divisions sprang up again, and stronger than ever: Without Li'ut's art of diplomacy, the beautiful dream would crumble.

It is then that the Goddess is reported to have visited Li'ut's youngest son, instructing him to finish the immense work his father had begun.

Comelk—as he was named—thanked the Goddess for her confidence, but explained that given the severity of the tribal quarrels, he didn't believe he could succeed. Eurydis then asked him to bring all of the clan chiefs before her, which Comelk promptly did.

Eurydis spoke to each one of them, demanding that they follow the path of wisdom. Everyone listened respectfully, for as barbaric and unruly as they were, their superstitions and traditions made them fear divine power.

Once Eurydis had left them, the chiefs spoke for a very long time, consulting the elders and the oracles. All problems were brought to the table, and all of them were resolved. They swore to keep peace forever, under the name of the Ithare Alliance.

Years passed, and little by little Ith became a city of reputable size, and eventually a truly grand city. At the time, Romine alone could still rival the young kingdom's capital. The tribes mixed among themselves, and the old quarrels became nothing more than a memory of the past. Ith had everything in its favor to become the leading power in the world... which it became, but not as it should have.

Blinded by their new power, which was so easily obtained, the descendants of the first tribes started to boast of their superiority over the rest of the known world. Eventually, a few wanted to demonstrate it. The Ithares launched small-scale war raids, and later small border disputes, which finally escalated to full-scale conquest campaigns that progressively became more frequent and deadlier.

At the end of the eighth Eon, they had made themselves masters of all the territory stretching from the Curtain Mountains in the east to the Vélanèse River in the west, and from the Median Sea in the south to the Crek region in the north. The Ithares behaved like genuine conquerors: They pillaged, burned, and ravaged shamelessly, massacring thousands...

One day, as the war chiefs gathered once again to consider an invasion into Thalitte territory, Eurydis appeared for the second time.

It is said that she came in the form of a young girl, hardly twelve years old, the way she is most often depicted to this day. Still, many of the seasoned warriors present thought they might die of fear, the Goddess's ire was so great.

She didn't speak, feeling that a piercing look was sufficient. She simply bored her gaze into the eyes of every one of the powerful individuals in the Ithare Empire, as it was called at the time. The war chiefs understood



her warning, immediately gave up all their plans for conquest, and made every resolution possible to put an end to the battles and the occupation of foreign lands. Each of them felt personally responsible for the major changes that needed to be brought to the Ithare way of life.

The next generation of Ithare people turned toward religion. At first, they experienced great tragedies. Their former victims, such as the young Goranese people, in turn became the executioners. The Ithare territory shrunk back to about what it was to start with: Ith and its surrounding area, and the Maz Nen Harbor.

But the years went by, and the Ithares launched into a new form of conquest, one that was surely more in line with what the goddess had in mind: The Maz left in all directions to the most distant reaches of the known world, with the aim of bringing the “Eurydis Ethic” to all the people of the known world. These excursions were very beneficial to the less evolved peoples, since the Ithares also brought their civilization with them: the calendar, writing, arts, and skills... everything they had learned over the course of their past conquests.

Some theorists are now proclaiming the third appearance of the Goddess. She will come again, of course, since she has appeared twice already. But the main question the Ithares ask themselves is this: What will be the next path to follow?

**Gisland River** – River that partially draws the border between the Kaul Matriarchy and Lorelia.

**Grand Guild** – This term designates the loose collective of practically all the criminal organizations in the Upper Kingdoms. There is no formal structure or hierarchy to the Grand Guild; it is more like an agreement among gangs that guarantees the respect of one another’s territory and activities, just like the kingdom-wide and citywide guilds.

Despite their numerous internal quarrels, the groups sometimes manage to agree to conduct an operation together, notably with contraband.

The Grand Guild does not officially deal in hired killings, but more often in extortion, kidnapping, fraud, contraband, and of course any form of stealing. However, it should be noted that any newcomer organization that doesn’t respect the agreements doesn’t last long.

**Grand House** – This is the seat of power of the Kaul Matriarchy, where the Mothers hold their council. Their living quarters are also located here, as well as their study chambers. Anyone can come to the Grand House

to express their grievances; fifteen or so Mothers are permanently present to accommodate them. At various times during the year, the study and council rooms of the Grand House are open to any curious visitors.

**Holy City** – Another name for Ith, the capital of the Ithare Kingdom. This term is most often used to describe the religious quarter, an enclave with its own walls, laws, and citizens, constituting a veritable city within the city.

**Ithare dice** – A very popular game throughout the entire known world. While its origin remains uncertain, it is nevertheless known that it spread at the same time as the Ithare Empire, during the seventh and eighth Eons, and was quickly adopted by all of the conquered territories.

The Ithare die has six sides, with four depicting the elements Water, Fire, Earth, and Wind. The two remaining sides represent a double or triple of one of the four elements. There are four kinds of dice: one for Wind, generally white; one for Fire, red; one for Earth, green; and one for Water, blue.

The number of dice used in a game varies depending on the rules of the chosen game and any specific arrangements decided upon between participants. While a set of four dice—a soldier—is generally all that's needed, it isn't uncommon to see games requiring several dozen dice. The star, the prophet, the emperor, the two brothers, and the guéjac are the most popular variations of the game. However, there are many more.

**Jez** – A native of Jezeba.

**Kauli** – The native language of the Kaul Matriarchy.

**Kaulien(ne)** – A native of the Kaul Matriarchy. Kaulienne indicates a female, while Kaulien indicates a male.

**Kurdalène** – This Lorelien king is celebrated for having fought long and hard against the Züu during his reign. The cult of the goddess of justice, Zuïa, through threats, extortion, and murder, then exercised such strong influence on the kingdom's nobles and bourgeois that the king couldn't make the slightest decision without the endorsement of the Züu.

At his wit's end, one day Kurdalène decided to put an end to it, and from then on he dedicated all his energy to the annihilation of the cult—at least in Lorelia.

He survived for almost two years cloistered in a wing of his palace, surrounded by handpicked guards, before the Züu finally assassinated him.

**Lermian (kings of)** – Five centuries ago, Lermian was still the capital of a rich kingdom that had nothing to envy in the nascent Grand Empire, or in the expanding Lorelien land. The royal family had controlled the throne for eleven generations, and the dynasty didn't seem anywhere close to dying off, since Orosélème, the monarch at the time, had three sons and two daughters with his wife, Fédéris.

Lermian had endured the Rominian invasions, the domination of the Ithare, and later on the Goranese expansion, all with relative ease. It seemed that she would just as easily resist Blédévon, the king of Lorelia, and his attempts to exert his influence. Blédévon wanted to incorporate Lermian, which was practically an island within his own kingdom, into his realm. But it wasn't in his interest to launch an assault against Lermian's walls, since the city acted as a buffer zone between his kingdom and the Goranese border; Orosélème was well aware and teased the Lorelien king with games of intimidation, promises, and intrigue.

Lermian could have become—more than it is today—a leading city of the Upper Kingdoms if misfortune hadn't struck its rulers. Orosélème died from food poisoning; his oldest son had been on the throne for only six days before perishing in a fall from the city's high walls. The younger son reigned for a little more than eight dékades before he just vanished. Since the last son was too young to rule, the prince consort was given the title of regent, but not one year later he had to be relieved of this title because he went mad after falling off his horse. The husband of the second princess refused the honor of ruling the kingdom, choosing a life of exile with his wife. Queen Fédéris asked her councilors to elect one of their own to be regent. Only one came forward, but he perished just a few days later, stabbed to death in the street by thieves.

After that, no one wanted to volunteer to be regent. The queen, feeling unable to rule alone, finally accepted the deal King Blédévon offered her, making Lermian a simple duchy of Lorelia. In return, the merchant kingdom offered the protection of its army.

The curse that weighed on Orosélème's dynasty seemed to stop there; Queen Fédéris and her last son escaped death.

Rumors spread that the deaths were a series of assassinations; some even said that Blédévon was behind it all. But the theorist of the Lorelien court managed to dispel any doubt by revealing that it was the will of the gods to join the two kingdoms under one crown.

From this tragic episode sprang the popular expression “as dead as the kings of Lermian.”

**Lesser Kingdoms** – Another name for the Baronies.

**Lorelien Fairs** – One of the oldest Lorelien traditions. During the tenth *dékade*, from the Day of the Merchant to the Day of the Engraver, the entry and exit of all goods into and out of the city—whose trade is authorized by the kingdom’s laws—are tax free.

Obviously, this is the time of the year when the majority of occasional traders, faraway artisans, foreigners, and rare-goods sellers decide to find buyers.

The fairs draw in a lot of people. In fact, about a third of the participants don’t come for business at all, but to simply enjoy the numerous attractions that come along with the fairs—street shows, games, banquets, and more. Some of them are generously paid for by the Crown, which sees it as an opportunity to affirm its prestige.

Anyhow, the kingdom’s coffers hardly lose out in the deal: Each seller has to pay a three-terce fee before he can set up even the smallest stand in the street. The process is tightly monitored and violators are severely punished: no more and no less than the immediate confiscation of the entirety of the violator’s goods.

Fairs also take place in the other large Lorelien cities, Bénelia, Lermian, and Pont. Here the fairs enjoy a relative local success, but they remain insignificant in comparison to the capital’s fairs.

**Louvelle** – River marking the border between the Baronies and the Lower Kingdoms.

**Lower Kingdoms** – This term designates either the territories stretching south of the Louvelle or the land collectively formed by these same territories *and* the Baronies.

**Margolin** – A medium-sized rodent. Adults can grow up to two feet long. There are several species: the copper, the screamer, and the glutton, among others.

Margolins are well-known in the south and central areas of the Upper Kingdoms, and thrive just as well on the plains as in the forests or along riverbanks. Generally considered to be pests because of their rapid proliferation, their occasional aggression, and their unpleasant-tasting flesh, they are sought after only for their skins, which artisans use for all sorts of furs, bags, and leathers.

**Maz** – Honorary title used primarily by the cult of Eurydis, but other religions have borrowed the title as well.

The title can only be transferred—with exactly one exception—from a Maz to one of his or her novices who, as shown by work and devotion, deserves the position. The Grand Temple must approve the transmission, which takes effect either immediately or at the death of the granter, depending on the arrangement. A rule forbids any Maz from passing on his or her title to a family member.

The one exception involves the spontaneous “elevation” of a novice as a thank-you for a service deemed particularly noteworthy. The title is often bestowed posthumously—and therefore cannot be transmitted—as a sign of gratitude for a lifetime of service to the cult. The Emaz reserve the exclusive power to elevate novices in this way.

The tangible advantages of a Maz are not defined, for they vary greatly according to the particular priest’s “career.” Some have many responsibilities in the cult’s main temples; others are entrusted with the occasional apprenticeship of a few novices, and still others are never called upon.

The number of living Maz is unknown, except by the archivists of the Grand Temple, who keep a continuous count. Many priests in foreign lands grant themselves the title without actually earning it, which doesn’t help the estimates. But legend has it that the Maz were originally only 338, as many as there are days in the year; similarly, there are as many Emaz as there are dékades.

**Mèche** – A small river that is completely contained within the borders of the Kaul Matriarchy, whose capital sits on her banks. A tributary of the Gisland River.

**Milliday** – A unit of time of Goranese origin representing one-tenth of a centiday: approximately one minute and twenty-six earthly seconds. Most people consider it useless to measure anything that takes less than a milliday; however, the unit is itself fractioned into “divisions,” representing about eight seconds, and then “beats,” which are less than a second.

**Mishra** – The cult of Mishra is at least as old as the Great Sohonne Arch. She was the Goranese people’s chief goddess before the Ithare army finally overcame Goran’s defenses, sometime during the eighth Eon. She reclaimed her role as chief goddess of the Goranese after the Ithares completely abandoned their warrior ways for religion. In the period that

followed, the city of Goran progressively became the empire of Goran, then the Grand Empire, and Mishra's cult developed at the same time.

Mishra is the goddess of just causes and of freedom. Anyone outside of Goran can appropriate her. And so it has happened that the people conquered by the Grand Empire have called upon the goddess for help, just as their conquerors did.

She has no known divine parentage; a few theologians present her as Hamsa's sister. There are very few Grand Temples dedicated to her—apart from Goran's impressive Freedom Palace, of course—but there are many followers who individually revere miniature idols of the goddess or her symbol, the bear.

**Moralist** – The moralist priests use the writings and narratives from all religions and combine them to find the morals that are most common and important: pity, tolerance, knowledge, honesty, respect, justice, etc.

They are often teachers and philosophers who humbly limit their task to the education of a small community. The most recognized of moralist cults is that of the goddess Eurydis.

**Niab** – A Kauli term. The niab is a deep-sea fish that only comes to the surface at night. Kaulien fishermen use a large dark-colored cloth to lure the fish by stretching it out on the surface of the water between several boats, thereby fabricating artificial darkness. Then all they have to do is dive in and “pick” them like fruit, since the fish enters into a state of drowsiness near the surface.

From this, the term “niab” is used as an insult for someone who is gullible, or acts without thinking.

**Odrel** – Divinity whose cult is widespread in the Upper Kingdoms. According to legend, Odrel is the second son of Echora and Olibar.

After a lifetime of work, a single Odrel priest managed to assemble more than five hundred stories that centered on the god of sadness, as he is sometimes called. None of the stories finish well. The most famous story by far is the one that tells of Odrel's complicated love affair with a shepherdess. It ends with the dramatic death of the woman and their three children, and Odrel's agonizing realization that he can't follow them into death, the only thing in the world beyond his reach.

The priest-historian finishes his work with these words: “No one has experienced such misfortune as Odrel. It's surely because of this that all the ill-fated, unlucky, and destitute; those who carry the burden of mourning,

regrets, and of memories; those who have known injustice, despair, disgrace, misery, all of life's trials; all have come, do come, and will come one day to seek comfort beside Odrel. He's the only god capable of understanding them, because he's the only one who himself inspires pity."

**Old Country** – Another name for the Romine Kingdom.

**Queen moon** – A small, smooth seashell, almost perfectly round in shape. Precious because of its rarity, the shell exists as three known types: the white, the most common; the blue, less common; and finally, the multicolored, a rarity. At one time, the last two varieties were used as money in some isolated parts of the Kaul Matriarchy. Elders may still accept a few shells in a transaction.

In fact, the seashell is still represented on every coin minted by the Treasury of the Matriarchy, and the Treasury adopted its name for its official currency, the queen, which exists in denominations of one, three, ten, thirty, and one hundred. The hundred-queen coins, as large as a hand, are not in general circulation, and are only used as a guarantee in transactions with the Matriarchy and other kingdoms.

**Ramgrith** – Native of the Griteh Kingdom. Also the primary language of this kingdom.

**Ramzü** – The language of the Züu.

**Terce** – The terce is Lorelia's official currency. There is a difference between the silver terce, which is most commonly used, and the gold terce, which is minted with an image of the king's head. Gold terces are known to have a level of purity unrivaled by similar coins. The denomination of official currency is the tice; one silver terce is worth twelve tices.

**Theorists** – A caste of priests devoted to all of the gods in general or, less frequently, to a few, or even just one. The theorists work to reveal the will of the gods through divine omens. Although the Grand Temples view them rather dimly, the royal courts and lords prize them, and they often act as astrologists and advisors.

**Three-Steps Guild** – Name given to the circle of prostitutes in Lorelia. The name originates from the fact that this "business" used to be confined to the part of town known as the lower city. These merchants of charm were so numerous that the pimps, tired of arguments that frequently devolved into fights, finally gave each one of them a portion of the street measuring exactly three steps.

Some pimps have held on to this tradition, even though the majority of prostitutes now gather in the harbor neighborhood, which is much larger.

**Upper Kingdoms** – Term used to designate the group of kingdoms comprised of Lorelia, the Grand Empire of Goran, and the Ithare Kingdom, and sometimes Romine. In the Lower Kingdoms, however, the term is used to indicate *all* of the countries north of the Median Sea, meaning the kingdoms listed above, with the addition of the Kaul Matriarchy and Arkary.

**Vélanèse River** – A Lorelien river. The town of Pont was built at its headwaters.

**White Country** – Another name for the Arkary Kingdom.

**Wise One** – Name sometimes given to the goddess Eurydis.

**Zuïa/Züu/Zü** – Called the goddess of justice by her followers, Zuïa is the goddess of the Züu assassins. A single follower of Zuïa is called a Zü, with the plural form being Züu.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Photo © Audrey Françaix, 2013*

A native of France and a lifelong fantasy enthusiast who numbers Jack Vance, Fritz Leiber, and Michael Moorcock among his heroes, Pierre Grimbert has been awarded the Prix Ozone, for best French language fantasy novel, and the Prix Julia Verlanger, for best science fiction novel in any language. He is the author of thirteen much-beloved novels of the Ji mythos, including the series the Secret of Ji, the Children of Ji, and the Guardians of Ji. He lives in northern France with his wife, Audrey Françaix (also a writer), and two sons.

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

As friends who share a passion for the French language and its literature, Matt Ross and Eric Lamb are excited to continue translating Pierre Grimbert's gripping Ji series for the English-speaking world.

Matt has been losing himself in fantasy books since he was in the third grade but only discovered a passion for the French language much later. These combined interests brought him to the Ji series, which a friend in France described as the "best French fantasy." He is pursuing a doctorate in ecology at Duke University in North Carolina, where he lives with his wife, Nicole.

Eric received his bachelor's degree in French from University of Colorado Boulder in 2010 and a certificate in applied literary translation from the University of Illinois in 2011. His first book-length translation, *My Beautiful Bus* by Jacques Jouet, was published in January of 2013 by the Dalkey Archive Press. Eric teaches French at Aspen High School in Colorado.